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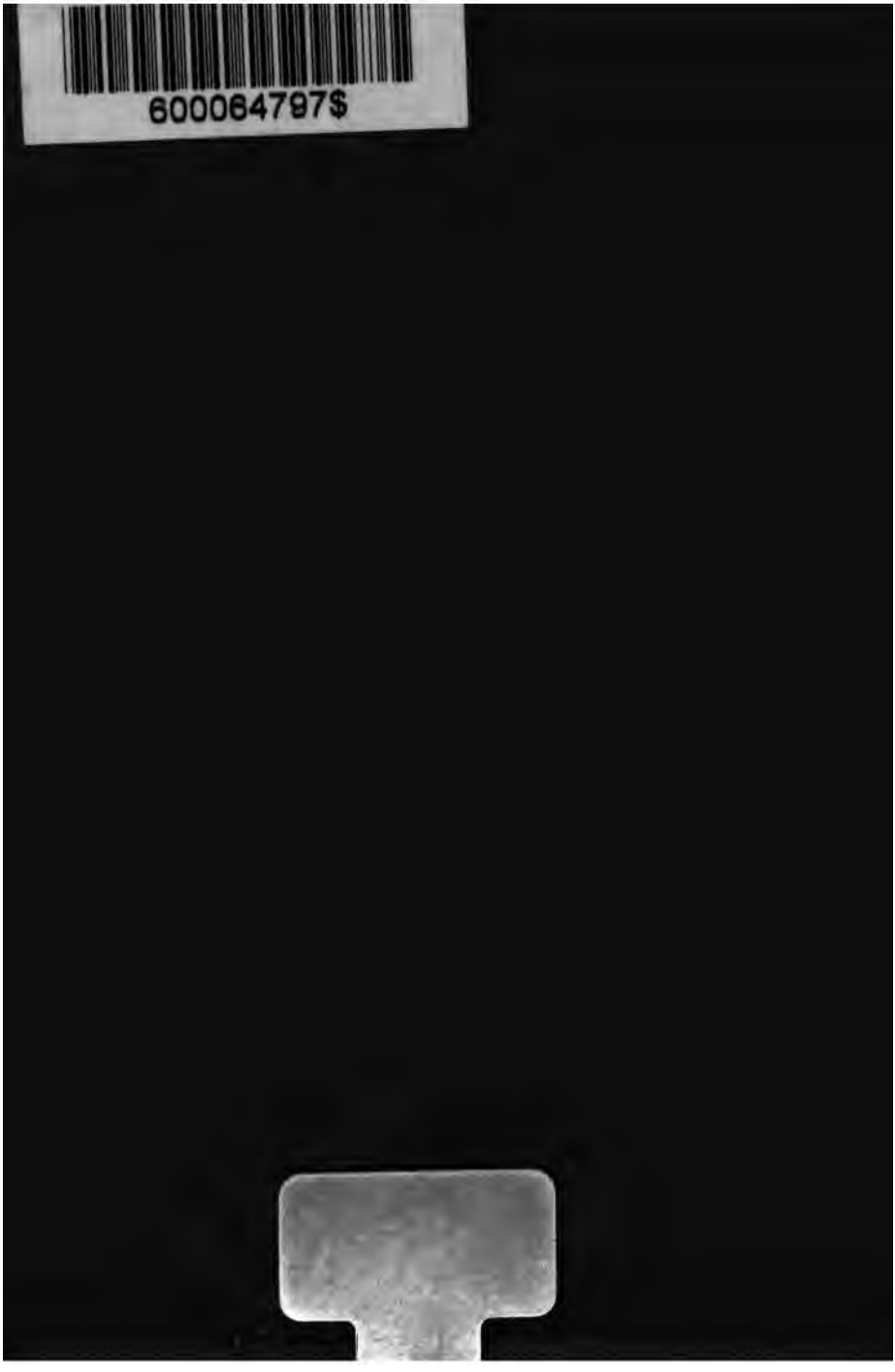
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MERVYN O'CONNOR

AND

OTHER TALES.

VOL. III.

MERVYN O'CONNOR

AND

OTHER TALES

BY

THE EARL OF DESART

AUTHOR OF

"THE HONOURABLE ELLA,"

"KELVERDALE,"

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,

13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1880.

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251. f. 664

LONDON:
PRINTED BY DUNCAN MACDONALD,
BLENHEIM HOUSE.

THE ARLMORE MYSTERY.

THE ARLMORE MYSTERY.

No. I.—Statement of Miss Alice Rowcliffe, of 103, Grosvenor Square.

OF course I remember Helen Mornington the year she came out in London. There were five or six what are called beauties came out that year, of which I believe I may, without vanity, call myself one—*quorum pars*—(I forget the rest); but certainly she was far and away the prettiest. I never saw anything like her skin; you might have compared it with velvet, if velvet could have been such a colour and so soft: creamy it was, and it never tanned or

freckled, as some skins of that kind do. It was always the same. Her hair, too, was very remarkable—a rich auburn, and almost down to her knees; indeed, with a very slight stoop, it *did* reach her knees, and not *scraggy*, as long hair often is. The Morningtons—who were very poor, for all their great relations—lived in a little house just outside papa's lodge gates, and I soon grew very fond of Helen. She was so patient, and bore all the little troubles and worries that surrounded her so wonderfully; and, under that calm and dignity, there beat a passionate heart; her nature was self-contained, but ardent. She was the sort of girl one felt would never *flirt*, but would have many men at her feet, and would love one, and one only.

Of course when we both came out the same year at the very same ball (Lady Millingham, Helen's aunt, presented her at the Drawing-Room), we had a sort of friendly chaff between us as to who would

obtain the first offers—or the first offer—I forget which. I need not explain how it was that my offers—which, after all, were numerous enough—all came to nothing (I forget who it was—some clever man—said the other day that pretty girls with brains often did not marry)—and will go on to tell you how mortified we all were when Helen announced one day, in her quiet, resolute way, that she intended to marry Harry Hengist. Of course he was very good-looking, and nice, and all that, but his £2,000 a year, or whatever it was, was not enough for himself alone, for his bets and his beautiful horses and clothes. Of course we all expostulated in vain. I, indeed, went so far as to hint that a certain Baronet with an enormous fortune only required a little encouragement to come to the point.

"You mean Sir John Fell," she said, looking very proud and lovely. "Well—yes—he *did* nearly come to the point, as you call it, and then I snubbed him, and

he has gone to Paris with somebody you and I may not mention, though we may look at her photograph in the shop windows and dress after it. And so, my dear, good little Alice, let me never hear the worthy Baronet's name again, but sit down and talk about Harry. Isn't he charming?"

Of course I said he was, as he really was, only rather extravagant; but I felt bound to try to show Helen that she ought to think twice before she committed herself. She was very fond of pleasure, of dress, and position; and during the short time she had been out in London she had wanted for nothing, having, as I said, plenty of rich relations. And her success in Society—for she was certainly *the* beauty that season—made them very generous to her. She let me go on a little about making two ends meet, and all that, and then said, very determinedly, "Yes, Alice; I've thought it all over, and I can do it. I can give up all these pleasures—and I love them very dearly, I

love them horribly. I always feel I was born to live in the purple and feast, but I have chosen deliberately. I love Harry better than fine clothes and a big house. Yes, I am sure I do. Don't say any more about it." And then we talked of other things. The bridesmaids' dresses was one of the topics, but I never forgot the deliberate way she said these words to me. And I was very sorry for Sir John Fell, notwithstanding his going to Paris with that horrid person.

I never saw a man so much in love with anyone as he was with my beautiful Helen. Two or three days after the announcement of her engagement to Mr. Hengist had appeared in the *Morning Post* he came to Grosvenor Square, looking as if he had not been to bed or washed, and asked me if it was true. His lips were white and trembling; and indeed he shook all over; and when I said, "Yes," I thought he would have fallen.

"If I had only spoken!" I heard him

whisper to himself. I felt very sorry for the poor man, but I thought it better to tell him at once that no speaking would have done any good, that she was very much attached to Harry, and that——but he did not wait for me to finish my sentence, and rather rudely dashed out of the room, with a most diabolical expression on his face—or, at least, I thought so in the glimpse of it I had. Poor man! He was out of his wits with grief, and certainly Helen was almost worth going mad about—at least, if a woman ever was.

I had not told Sir John more than the truth. She was very much in love with Harry Hengist; and it seemed to me that, when listening to his careless, rather witty, and superficial talk about himself (always about himself), she put aside for the time her ready sense of the ridiculous, and her shrewdness, and took the good-looking young gentleman rather too blindly at his own valuation. He certainly was very

handsome, and always beautifully dressed, and he could talk agreeably enough—that is, if you took an interest in the subject—but sometimes I wondered whether he was worthy of the admiration Helen, who was sometimes so sarcastic and clever, lavished upon him, and whether in this instance her customary penetration did not fail her. I do not mean to say I was not in love, rather, with Harry Hengist. We all were. Every girl as she came out fell in love with him, as certainly as she was presented at Court; but, when it came to the serious question of Helen's trusting herself to him for life, it was rather a different matter. People said that he used once to drink, that he gambled, that he had behaved ill to ever so many women, that he had an establishment somewhere; but all these tales, which were of course brought to her, had no more effect upon Helen than water on a duck's back.

"I would marry him," she said, with her

white teeth clenched, "if they proved he had murdered an archbishop."

Well, I was one of the bridesmaids at the wedding, which came off in St. George's, Hanover Square, and I certainly thought then, and think now, that never had I seen so handsome a pair. I was very sorry to miss my friend, for she was a woman who could be a real friend, and would willingly give up a ball or party to sit with one if one were ill or low; but the letters she wrote me were full of happiness for about eight months. Then a hope which had been—I could read between the lines—great happiness to her was dashed away, and after that, I thought, a tinge of sadness, of bitterness, had crept into her correspondence with me.

Alas! This was soon explained, for I was told one evening at a party by a great friend of his that he was utterly "smashed" —"backed Desdemona for the Oaks, stood to win fifteen thou.," and was going to India

with his wife, to take some appointment there. I met them in London soon after, and was shocked to see how ill and worn she looked; but still she was very beautiful. She told me that they had got a reprieve from India for a year, and that they were going to try to economise in a tiny house they had taken in Stanley Street, Pimlico. Poor Helen seemed to have lost all her spirits, and the visits I paid to Stanley Street told me that they were *very* poor. Once there were some strange men in the house, and Helen was crying upstairs, and I heard Mr. Hengist's voice—swearing I fear he was—in the dining-room. She tried to meet me as if nothing had happened; but, poor dear, it cost her a great effort. Then I heard terrible rumours of him. How he drank, and spent the little money he had on some other woman, and—they even said this—that he beat her when he had been drinking. People said worse things even—things I cannot put down on paper—about his

asking Sir John Fell and other old admirers of her, who were rich, to the house; but of course I did not believe them, knowing my proud Helen too well.

The next thing I heard was that they had gone down for a short visit to Arlmore, Sir John Fell's place, and then—but I believe that is not to be part of my story. As my pen is to be again required, however, I will only say *au revoir* to the reader of these lines.

No. II.—Statement of Miss Marie Martin, Lady's Maid, now out of Place.

I was engaged by Miss Mornington, about a month before her marriage with Mr. Hengist, to come to her on the day of the ceremony. Of course it was not to be expected that I should have any of the trouble of the *trousseau* and the packing. Thank Heaven, I know my duty, and never interfere with other people's. I have been

asked to put down exactly what I remember important that happened during my service with Mr. and Mrs. Hengist. Except that Mr. H. was a brute, and drank, and ill-used his wife—which is not so uncommon among the upper classes as some folks suppose—nothing much occurred till the end, except that, of all the villains I ever came across in my pilgrimage through life, Jackeymo Brachy, Mr. Hengist's Italian valet, was the worst. I predicted what would happen from the first; at least, I always knew he was not born to be drowned.

He hated me because he knew that I could read his black heart like a book; but there was one person he hated worse, and that was master. This very feeling made him pity poor Mrs. Hengist, as, indeed, I did, and sometimes when he came out of the room, when Mr. H. had begun to go at her with his foul manner, I have seen Jackeymo come out shaking his fist, and muttering and looking as black as thunder. Not being

a scholar, and his muttering being in Italian, I cannot tell what he said, but more than once I caught the word "deavolo," which, I am told, signifies something bad. Of course, when Mr. Hengist settled to go to India I gave warning, having a respect for my liver. And, indeed, I had only stayed on so long, through all the fusses and worries and executions in the house, and what not, because of a kind of affection I could not help feeling for poor Mrs. Hengist.

Before they started for Marseilles, however, they were going a short visit to Arlmore Hall, the residence of Sir John Fell, Baronet, a very nice rich gentleman, who, they tell me, Mrs. H. might have had if she would—more fool she not to, say I, with all respect—but I always say what I mean. The day after we arrived was the 16th of August, and the gentlemen all went some miles away to the moors to shoot grouse. Mrs. H. was in very low spirits all that day; I never saw her so low before, and so rest-

less. This going to India, as it got nearer, frightened her, I fancy; and, indeed, it would have frightened anyone to go away alone with him.

The night we arrived there had been some fuss about the luggage, and Mr. H. had discharged Jackeymo then and there, surprising all the servants there, who are a very respectable set, by his violence. He would not let the man into the house, but reviled him from the steps, told him to go to h—l for his wages, and to walk every step of the way back to the station, which was nine miles off, and be d—d. Little as I liked the man, I felt rather sorry that he should be insulted before the butler (a very respectable man I had known before) and footmen. As I turned away into the house I caught sight of Jackeymo's face; it was quite awful. He shook his fist in the air in quite an operatic manner, and disappeared. I looked round to see whether Mr. Hengist had remarked it, but he was engaged in

asking his wife, who had been looking on at the scene, why the d—l she could not go on to the drawing-room.

I have little more to tell. I slept in a room in the same passage as those occupied by her and Mr. Hengist; for the last two or three months they had occupied different rooms. My mistress retired to bed at about eleven; and happening to sit up writing to my brother—who is the principal clerk in one of the first houses of Baltimore —I heard Mr. Hengist step along the passage. I knew it, for, as usual, he was very much intoxicated. I heard his heavy kind of breathing and muttering as he passed, and he fell against my door. Then I heard him, after one vain effort, succeed in opening his door, and bang it with a violence that would have waked the dead.

And then I went to bed. Suddenly—I afterwards ascertained it was about four o'clock—I was awoke by shouting in the garden, answered from the house. The

man, a watchman, said some one had broken into the house through the pantry. Of course I got up and put on my clothes, having doubly-locked my door, for there are things I cannot pretend not to be frightened of. Everybody about the house seemed to be roused, and to be running about, when, almost at my door, there was a loud shout of "Here he is! We've got him!" I plucked up my courage and peeped out. There were two men—a footman and the watchman who first roused us—holding some one by the collar, and that some one, with his eyes starting out of his head—not as if he was ashamed of himself, but as if he had seen something horrible—was Jackeymo Brachi.

I was about to express my astonishment, when we heard a loud cry from the room where Mr. Hengist slept. At first I was inclined to shut myself up in my room, but there were so many of us that we all went together to the door, Jackeymo being drag-

ged along. I shall never forget the sight that awaited us. There was Mr. Hengist, on the bed, with his head hanging down, and the blood dropping from a great wound in his neck on to the floor.

No. III.—Statement of Mr. J. Hardly Clark, of 99, Duke Street, St. James's, S.W.

I am a financial agent, and occasionally procure advances for noblemen and gentlemen, sometimes on their note of hand. On the 11th day of August, 186—, I received a visit from a client, Mr. Henry Hengist, who required a loan on his note of hand, which was backed by a goodish name, his own, I should mention, being worthless in the market.

He objected to receiving a cheque, saying that he did not wish to pay the money in to his bankers (having, as I suppose, overdrawn his account there), and I paid him in notes and gold. The sum was £275.

No. IV.—Statement of Inspector Drayden, of the Detective Police.

On the 18th of August, 186—, I was sent down to Arlmore, the residence of Sir John Fell, to investigate the circumstances of the death of Mr. Henry Hengist, who had been found dead on his bed the morning before, with a jagged wound in his throat. A pair of large scissors which lay on the ground near the bed, and which were covered with blood, showed what the weapon had been. The case did not seem to offer very much difficulty, as a discharged servant of the deceased, from whom he had parted with angry words only the day before, and who, they told me, could be proved to have been lurking about the place for twelve hours before the murder, had actually been caught in the house ten minutes before the murder was discovered, having broken through the pantry window, and so entered. I could scarcely be blamed for forming an opinion on such evidence.

My first inquiry was, of course, whether anything was missing from the room. The maid-servant said no, but on my insisting on an interview with the wife of the deceased, who seemed overwhelmed with grief, she told me that there was a sum of over £200 in gold and notes in his travelling-bag, which opened with a peculiar spring. The bag was open, and the money had certainly gone. Asked who besides herself knew of the existence of this money, she at first replied no one, but, being pressed, said that the discharged servant, whom I mentioned as having broken into the house—an Italian, Giacomo Bracci by name—knew of it. It also transpired that this Bracci knew the secret of the spring of the bag.

There is scarcely any other important fact connected with my visit which I need mention. There was a fussy old gentleman of the name of Guelrose, who was eager to tell me many irrelevant facts, and was full of a quarrel he [illegible]essed between Sir

John Fell and the deceased, and some words he had overheard in some mysterious way in the drawing-room. However, putting Mr. Guelrose firmly aside, I pieced my evidence together, and a verdict of wilful murder was returned against Bracci at the inquest.

NOTE BY THE COMPILER.

It is scarcely necesary to follow Inspector Drayden through his account of the well-known trial with its result—the conviction of the Italian. Although the man at times protested his innocence, he never explained, or attempted to explain, his breaking into the house that night, but seemed to be seized with a mysterious kind of wondering horror and surprise. He asked several times to see the widow of his victim, but, although she expressed herself willing to go to the prison, the state of her nerves was such as to render it impossible—at least, in the opinion of her friends.

As everyone knows, Bracci was condemned to be hanged; then there was a re-action in his favour in consequence of the general distrust of circumstantial evidence. No one certainly had seen Bracci strike the fatal blow, or even enter the room where the murder took place; the stolen money had never been found on him or traced to any accomplice of his. Petitions to the Home Secretary poured in; the penny papers took it up and published legions of letters and articles, and at length the Home Secretary gave way, and, illogically enough, commuted the sentence to penal servitude for life. Equally illogically, too, the very paper that had urged this course now turned round and said that either he was guilty or innocent; if guilty, he should be hanged, for it was a foul murder; if innocent, he should be set free. Soon, however, the whole thing was forgotten, and the Arlmore Mystery, as it was called by the newspapers while the decision

was pending, went to the limbo of other nine-days' wonders.

No. V.—Second Statement of Miss Alice Rowcliffe.

After the terrible Arlmore tragedy I lost sight of my poor darling Helen for a long time. They said she was very poor, but very resigned; and now and then I got a little note from her, just saying she was alive, and that we should meet again some day. I did so long to see her, for I had my trouble, too, then—trouble of the heart which she would have understood; and besides, I felt that she must look too lovely in a widow's cap. A disappointment, which has nothing to do with what I am to relate —but which I cannot quite forget ever— had made me anxious to leave London for a time, and it was early in June in the year 186— that papa, who is always so good to me, announced that he had arranged to go

to Paris for the season, and could take mamma and me to the Italian lakes, or Switzerland, or wherever we chose. I mention this because it fixes the date of Helen's first visit to me as a widow. The cap did suit her, as I thought. But there were lines on the white skin which were new to me. An expression of pain I did not remember seemed to flit now and then over her face, but she was to me the dear, beautiful, sympathizing angel she had always been. It is dreadful to think of all my selfish talk before she had time to get in *her* news.

"I hope you won't be shocked, Alice," she said, in that soft, low voice of hers, "I am going to be married again."

Shocked! I jumped up and kissed her. Her lonely life seemed so unnatural, and she was so young. I was delighted.

"Do I know who it is, dear? Oh, I hope so," I said.

"I think you do," she answered, smiling a little.

"Sir John Fell?"

"Yes, Alice," she said, in a low voice.

I noticed she got very pale suddenly, and her lips quivered, but then of course the name, spoken first to her, must remind her of Arlmore and all those horrors.

Of course we put off our journey abroad, and I think papa was very glad to stay, after all; and, though Helen had no bridesmaids this time, for my part I thought the wedding gayer, or at least more promising, than the first. Sir John was the most perfect gentleman, something older than she, but I think that is so much the better. He worshipped the very ground she trod upon, and although he had shut up his principal place in the north—where the murder was—he had several others still nicer, and such a charming house in Park Lane! I never saw a man so much in love. I could not

help watching them both, and I thought I noticed once or twice, when she met his affectionate, admiring gaze, something like a tear trembled in her eyes. One thing I may mention before my part of these recollections is finished—namely, that Sir John told me, a few days before the wedding, that she had made him promise to leave no stone unturned to effect the liberation of the murdering Italian, Giacomo Bracci. I told him I did not think it quite good taste of her, even though she was actuated by generous pity; but Sir John, who is quite mad where she is concerned, was almost rude to me, and told me I did not understand what noble nature was.

NOTE BY THE COMPILER.

Stern necessity has obliged us to leave out some very beautiful reflections and sentiments with which Miss Rowcliffe's statement ends.

No. VI.—Statement of Lord Naseby, of the Albany, Piccadilly, W.

Sir John Fell was a great friend of mine. I thought him an ass to marry. I think so still. The woman's being a widow made the folly still greater. However, I was astonished when he came to me about a month after his marriage, and asked me to come with him to his lawyer's to witness his signature to a deed of separation from his wife, and to arrange about being a trustee for the money he settled on her.

He looked very ill and wretched, and, had I not made it a practice never to be sorry for anyone but myself, I should have pitied him.

I undertook the trusteeship, which will be a cursed trouble. I am convinced, from things he said, that Jack was as much in love with the woman the day he signed the deed of separation as the day he married her. It is very mysterious.

No. VII.—Statement of Mr. Guelrose, of White's, Boodle's, and the Marlborough Clubs.

I was staying at Arlmore at the time of the murder of Harry Hengist; and, indeed, I was the first to take the right version of the story to London. Of course one could not pretend to be very sorry for a man who violated all the *convenances* in the way he did; but it was a terrible blow to poor dear Mrs. Hengist, a lovely and charming woman.

I am asked to state anything that I happen to remember with regard to that visit, and with regard to circumstances which raised certain suspicions in my mind—suspicions which an idiotic police officer of course pronounced nonsense, because they did not tally with his sledge-hammer way of looking at the case.

Imprimis, on the 16th of August, the day before the murder, I happened to be seated in the large bow-window of the gallery, a

very beautifully-shaped room, with the Vandyck in it, in the afternoon. I had not gone out shooting with the other men. Sir John Fell, our host, entered, and was saying something to Mrs. Hengist, who was sitting in the room, and, having come in after me, was, I fancy, unaware of my presence; immediately after entered Hengist, who had evidently had too much whisky on the hill, and made use of a very coarse expression to his wife. Sir John resented this, and there were some very fierce words, ending by Hengist leaving the room, swearing that he would pay off his (Sir John's) insolence on his own wife, to whom again he applied a very opprobrious name. I would willingly have escaped from my disagreeable position, but it was impossible; and I could not avoid hearing these words pass between Mrs. Hengist and Sir John :—

"You must not say such things to me, Sir John. It is almost like believing I am what he calls me."

"And you will go to India with him? He will kill you."

"I must."

"Oh, if you were free, my only love!"

"You would marry me?"

"Marry you! Oh, Helen, if you knew how I long for you!"

Then some one came in, and I was enabled soon after to escape. That is all I have to say.

No. VIII.—STATEMENT OF THE REV. R. BOLTON, RECTOR OF ST. MARY'S, ROSNEATH STREET, PUTNEY.

ON the night of the 20th of December last, I was sent for to go to the bedside of a dying lady, who had lately taken some lodgings—poor ones enough—in my parish. I had noticed her on two or three occasions in church, principally because she used to leave before the end of the service. I happened to see her face as she left on one of these occasions, and was struck by its

frightened expression. She was young and handsome, and was dressed very quietly in black. It was easy to see she was a lady.

I found her evidently dying, from the effects, the doctor told me, of an overdose of some poison she had swallowed by accident. He had done all he could. The pain was over now, but she was sinking fast.

I could make neither head nor tail of her gasping and whisperings to me. Such words as "Forgive—Sir John—he loved me; the devil tempted me. Quick! Yes! I did it. Let the poor man go free!" They told me nothing. I saw that the poor woman suffered agony of mind through not being able to communicate her ideas to me; but I could do nothing to help her, and the effort to speak only hastened the end.

At last, after a weary waiting, the convulsive shudders that presage the departure of the spirit began, and for a moment I ceased my prayers, thinking she was gone. She raised herself in bed with a supreme

effort, and, ejaculating in my ear, "I did it! Take that letter to them! I confess! Not Giacomo! I——" and she fell back, dead.

The letter she alluded to I supposed to be one addressed to the Home Secretary, which I posted to the Home Office. After some difficulty, we ascertained that the lady was Lady Fell, wife of Sir John Fell, and, I believe, separated from her husband. Sir John Fell arrived when we had made the death public, and his excessive grief caused us to wonder at their separation. I mentioned that I had sent the letter to the Home Office, and he grew perfectly livid; accused me of officious meddling, and was altogether so rude that I was glad to get away to my house and have done with the business. This is literally all I know of the matter.

NOTES BY THE COMPILER.

The following paragraph appeared in the

newspapers on the 30th of December in the same year:—

"*The Arlmore Mystery.*—We have to announce that the convict Giacomo Bracci, who was sentenced to death five years ago for murder (the sentence being commuted to penal servitude), has been granted a free pardon by the Crown; circumstances having come to light that show him to have been innocent of the crime laid to his charge."

After the death of Sir John Fell, which happened nearly a year after this, the new baronet, Sir Harold, had extensive alterations made at Arlmore; especially in that part of the house made detestable by the memory of the again mysterious murder. Buried under a loose board in the flooring of the room that had been Mrs. Hengist's on the fearful night, a workman found no less a sum than £251 in gold and notes.

Extract from "The Blankshire Gazette."

"It will be in the memory of our readers

that we announced the intention of Sir Harold Fell, Bart., to erect two monuments side by side in Arlmore churchyard, to the memory of the late baronet and his consort, who died within a year of one another. On Saturday last these two monuments were erected, and were universally admired; but, unfortunately, the next morning it was discovered that during the storm the monument to the memory of Lady Fell had been struck by lightning and utterly destroyed."

PART OF A LETTER found in 187— by Sir HAROLD FELL, Bart., in a box of old papers, the first half of the letter being missing.

"God knows I understand your feelings —your misery. Why do you not hate me? Oh, how I hate myself! Yet, John, I did it for you. Insensate that I was, it was only when too late that I found what I had rejected in rejecting you! Try to forget me; or, if you must think of me, think of me as I was before grief and hope combined

had maddened me. Yes, you are right; we must not meet. To look into each other's eyes *now* would be misery unbearable.

"I pray to die, John—I pray to die! God only knows what I have suffered—before and after!——[A piece was torn out here.] It was life for life, John. One of us must have died, and I could not bear to give up the glimpse of happiness I saw——[Another hiatus.] Your promise about Bracci—conceal nothing if necessary. I am not afraid; I have lost all in losing you! Good-bye!"

SHOCKING!

A FRAGMENT FROM THE MEMOIRS OF AN ENGLISH LADY.

SHOCKING!

I HAVE ventured to call the story of a little bit of my life "Shocking," to remind my readers that they are expected to be shocked by it, and that the moral it conveys should be repugnant to the heart of all truly fashionable people. Of course none but fashionable people will read it. But, shocking as my conduct was, I fear I cannot repent or be ashamed of it, though I am philanthropic enough to hope that my sad example may act as a warning to all young married women.

The essence of autobiography is egotism, as some writer remarked, and I shall not

therefore apologise for the number of "I's" which will occur in the following pages.

My mother was a very well-known person in London Society, and in other societies too. She lived in and for the world—the world of ball-going and amusement—and played her part in it with much zeal and success.

It was only when an unfortunate redness of her nose, caused, ill-natured people said, by over-tight lacing, disgusted her with the looking-glass, that she adopted the High-Church pietism which she now is so devoted to; and as she sits in her favourite corner of the pretty church she attends so regularly, with her lovely books of devotion, her smelling-bottle, and her general air of condescending piety, you really forget all about her nose, and are inclined to ignore the reason which has so happily, if painfully, brought her into the arms of the Church.

She was always a very good mother to me, and, from the auspicious day which saw my *début* before our gracious Queen at St.

James's, till that no less auspicious when she wept quietly behind me as Tom placed a gold ring on my hand at the altar of St. George's, Hanover Square, she was always most careful of my welfare, and eager for my advancement and happiness. And what a chaperon she was! Even at three in the morning, when other chaperons were asleep or fuming with the desire for bed, there she sat, pale and determined, ready to encourage a good *parti* or frown upon a bad one, or on me if I encouraged him. Many a time have I reached home smarting from the pinches she, for my own good, had bestowed upon my arms when I had been more than usually obstinate in preferring some good-looking Guardsman, with three hundred a-year, to an elder son ready to place the disposal of his prospective income at my feet.

And her vigilance had its reward, for at the end of my second season, just as papa was beginning his annual growl about the

bills, the *Morning Post* was enabled (by mamma sending them the information) to announce my forthcoming marriage with Sir Thomas Higbury, of Happlehome Hall, Herts, and Dustygrove Manor, Staffordshire, quite one of the *best men*, in a pecuniary sense, of the year. Tom loved me in the most ridiculous, old-fashioned way, and always treated me as if I were in some way his superior, whereas—but I suppose I had better keep my deficiencies to myself. Let it suffice that I *was* rather pretty, could play on the piano and sing after a fashion, knew the date of a good many events in English history, and the capital towns of some of the principal countries, and had developed —unaided by any previous knowledge or training—a quite marvellous amount of æsthetic taste in what we all called "High Art" furniture. I think I knew how to dress, too, and papa—who usually found fault with me, so his testimony is important

—said that I had an enormous talent for spending money.

Well, "we were wed, and merrily rang the bells" in Hertfordshire and Staffordshire, and down at papa's place, such a dismal one, where we used to have shoulders of mutton for lunch and rings for our napkins; and we went off for our honeymoon amid the orthodox shower of old shoes, grinning like a couple of idiots, as we no doubt were.

And here one of the most humiliating of my confessions must come. I was absurdly, inexpressibly happy during this same honeymoon. I had so often laughed at the thing, and vowed it was a relic of barbarism, and that a married couple should at once commence the life apart from each other, except at meal-times, which is their after-fate, that it was very dreadful to me to be so happy.

Of course, no one is ever "in love" nowadays, so it could not have been *that*. No,

I fancy it must have been the getting away from papa and mamma; combined, perhaps, with the feeling that I was now free to amuse myself as I listed; with no one to frown or say unpleasant things to me when I flirted, even if it were with dear, handsome, penniless Captain Regy Rapper of the Lancers. Regy had always been my favourite partner, and his despair when I told him that the announcement in the *Morning Post* was true was very touching.

"I suppose I shall never see you again now," he said, and I declare the look in his big blue eyes quite made my heart beat. I assured him that my marriage would make no difference; except, indeed, that it would enable me to see my friends oftener than ever. But he would go on talking nonsense about my being lost to him, and so on, till I was quite glad when my next partner came up and took me away from the poor captain.

A melancholy man at a ball is perfectly

intolerable; he should do all that sort of thing at his club, and put on high spirits just as he puts on a dress-coat when he comes out to amuse *us*.

He came to the wedding—which he thought it funny to call "the funeral," I remember—and really made it look as if it were what he called it; and the reproachful look he gave me as I got into the carriage with Tom would have been touching, only at that moment I was taken up with Tom's stupidity in letting some of my lace get shut up in the door.

It was rather curious that the very first words I ever addressed to my husband—after he was my husband—were cross ones, but seeing lace like that in such danger would make anyone cross.

But somehow, clumsy and stupid and ridiculously in love as Tom was, the honeymoon went like lightning, and I scarcely opened one of the many books (French novels nearly all of them) that I had taken

to while away what I thought would be so very dreary a time.

However, as there was no one there to see except the servants, and they expected us to be loving, I managed to put up with treacledom of the most orthodox type: let Tom put his arm round my waist whenever we sat down on a bench in the park, and left my hand in his for hours together; in fact, we "kept company" just as the footman and maid do, and spooned like a couple of sentimental German tradespeople. But everything must have an end, and eventually we returned to the world, which no doubt had not missed us very much during our absence.

The first person to call in Belgrave Square, where we had a house furnished in high-art style from cellar to attic, was Regy Rapper, who looked rather ill and depressed, poor fellow, but rallied when he saw that he was boring me, and told us all the news, and made himself very agreeable,

taking Tom off at last to look at some horses at Tattersall's—some of his own, I think they were—which poor Tom ended by buying, and did not pay more than double their value.

That was Tom's great foible, good-nature; he never could say "No" to anyone, and, if he fancied a man of his acquaintance was hard-up or in any trouble, there was scarcely any folly he would not commit.

"What's the use of my being rich if I can't help my friends who are poor?" he would say; and it was in vain I preached to him on the utter uselessness of such doings, and on the host of enemies he would raise up for himself if he lent people money.

"Then I'll give it, you small philosopher," he said, giving me a kiss; "but don't you be led away by those humbugging sayings. A gentleman feels no humiliation in being under an obligation; it's only a cad who dislikes the man who has helped him."

Of course we did not stay in London long,

but soon migrated to Dustygrove—a nice old place, well situated for hunting—and soon after arrived Regy Rapper, with four horses, and took up his abode with us, apparently for the rest of the hunting season. I thought this rather cool, for I am sure, whatever I may have *said*, I never meant him to stay more than a usual visit; but, after all, he was very amusing and useful, and fetched and carried for me very well, and always looked nice, and never dreamed of flirting with anyone but me, though Lady Daydreeme would have given her eyes to detach him; so, as long as Tom did not object, it was not for me to do so. But, after he had been with us about six weeks, Tom did object, and for the first time his manner to me was decidedly unpleasant.

"Some ill-natured woman has been abusing me to you," I said, for I was annoyed. I liked Tom always to be smiling and affectionate to me.

"I shouldn't allow anyone to abuse you

to me, but I confess that I have heard something that has put me out."

"So you want poor Regy put out too," I said, with angry flippancy.

"I certainly think such a long visit as this unusual, and I don't choose my wife to be talked about."

"And I don't choose my friend to be turned out of my house just because a set of country bumpkins, who know nothing of Society, choose to jabber."

Tom got rather white. I had never seen him angry before, and I think it became him. I felt that if he looked at me long in that stern way, I should give in, and begin to cry, and ask him to pet me again; but he said nothing, evidently putting a good deal of restraint on himself to remain silent, and left my room. And then I set to work and cried, just like the heroine of one of those dreary romances that amused our grandmothers, who were always retiring to their own rooms, letting down their hair,

and, while calling upon their lovers by their surnames, shedding bucketfuls of tears. But it was of course important that in our first domestic difference I should win, so I stood firmly to my guns, and that very night, before Tom and several other people, I asked Regy to manage so that he could stay with us to the end of the season. Regy, who had never intended to go, accepted with rather an amused look in his face, and said things that evening to me—when Tom was nodding over the paper in the smoking-room—which I ought not to have allowed; but I was angry with Tom, and—and—— Well, anyhow I *did not* resent them.

And let me mention here that it is not so easy a thing for a virtuous matron to resent these things as it may seem to those who think the fictions I before mentioned—with the heroine's awe-inspiring "Sir!"—are natural and like unto life. You cannot box a man's ears without creating a scandal; leaving the room is not much use; and as

to bringing confusion on a nineteenth-century Adonis by cold looks or proud glances, you might as well try to quiet a mad bull with a bundle of tracts.

Well, I am not going to weary you by the account of how Regy gradually got a certain amount of influence over me, and made me do things which I did not at heart want to do, and made me tell him—which was not true—that I was fond of him, and made me use all sorts of little mean tricks to blind poor dear credulous Tom, who nevertheless seemed to be losing his spirits and fretting a great deal about something.

Of course Regy was quite right when he said that I was only doing exactly what everyone else in my position was also doing; that the age of prudery and all that kind of folly was over; but then there was one thing that he overlooked, and which I am really ashamed to put down here: that I liked my husband better than Captain Rapper.

Of course Regy was a hundred times better-looking and more clever and popular than Tom, but—it was some sad want in my constitution—I neglected to find the usual sweetness in him, and secretly and with much confusion preferred the plain bread and butter of everyday life to which I was lawfully and prosaically entitled. And at last I think this strange fact seemed to dawn upon Regy; he became savage, and tyrannised over me in the most fearful ways. I really had to manœuvre with intense cunning to get a little time alone with Tom now and then; and Regy was always catching us together, and was angry after having done so, so that my life was made perfectly wretched. Tom's low spirits, too, did not make things much pleasanter; and my delight knew no bounds when, one day, towards the end of February, Regy announced that he was going to Melton for a week's hunting. I tried to catch Tom's eye as he told us this, but only caught Regy's;

and he divined what was in my mind, and looked positively diabolic.

As the time for his departure grew near, I counted the days; but my disappointment was great when, the very day before the blessed departure was to take place, Tom suddenly determined to go to London.

"I have had some business to do for some time," he said, when we were alone together for a few moments, Regy having gone to the stables to smoke a pipe; "and —and—it is best perhaps you should know the truth, Cicely. You have chosen that the county should talk of you in such a way that, though of course I do not believe there is a particle of truth in the gossip, yet I don't choose to leave my home while Rapper is here. His visit to Melton enables me to do my business."

I longed to tell him all—yes, all the truth—for Tom would have forgiven me, I know, and there was nothing really bad to tell; but Regy came in at that moment, and

the opportunity was lost. The next day he —Tom—went by an early train, and Regy was to go after lunch. I found a note on the hall-table when I came down in my husband's hand. It was to the effect that, although he disdained such a feeling as jealousy, and would not insult himself and me by thinking there could be anything wrong, yet my conduct in insisting on the perpetual presence with me of Regy was very hurtful to my reputation and his feelings; that of course, if I insisted, he was not prepared to take any active steps to shorten that gentleman's visit, but that he could not help thinking I would respect his wishes, and perhaps, in memory of the affection he still believed I had once borne him, would——, &c., &c.

It was stiff and ill-expressed, but I could read affection and pain between the lines, and I made up my mind on the spot as to my course of action.

I managed to avoid Regy till luncheon,

and then, to my horror, he informed me that he had changed his plans, and was not going to Melton.

"Indeed, I wrote to put that off three days ago," he said, smiling in *such* a cunning way, "directly I heard *he* was going to town. We shall have a whole week together."

I tried to snub him—I tried to tell him the truth. Whether it was my excessive weakness, or his enormous strength of character, I know not, but I only know I failed, and felt more than ever in his power now; and with my husband ever so many miles away, too. What could I do? I could not turn the man out of the house; and yet I knew the talk—bad enough before—would redouble now. What could I do, I say? I made up my mind. Just as the servants were laying the cloth for dinner, when Regy was smoking his usual cigarette in the conservatory, a veiled figure might have been observed to steal from the side-

door near the garden, and take the direction of the town. It was 1. My heart stood still as I moved noiselessly past the conservatory. My terror of the man there was causeless, but it was absolute. I felt that, were I caught in my flight, he would keep me chained at home, unable to escape from his influence; so I stole away; half walked, half ran the five miles between me and the railway station; took a place in the night mail to London, and whirled into that city about nine o'clock, cold, hungry, foot-sore, and excited. I had forgotten to bring enough money, and fearing I should not perhaps find Tom, was afraid to take a cab, so, losing my way constantly, I walked through the wet streets from Euston Square, and eventually reached the Albany, where Tom had rooms—his old rooms—as the house in Belgrave Square was being repainted.

The woman who opened the door belonged to the place, and did not know me.

"Sir Thomas is engaged," she said.

"Oh! tell him a lady wishes to see him on urgent business."

"Why, that's what the other lady said just now," said the woman, grinning.

"The other lady!"

"Yes; as is with him now."

I turned pale, faint. *This* was my reward, then, for flying from my home!

"Let me in!" I exclaimed, pushing past the old woman with the strength of a fury. "Let me pass! I am his wife!"

I do not know whether my strength or the announcement of my position did it, but I got in, and dashed into the room, knowing the way, as I had come with mamma to have tea with him once after we were engaged. There was Tom standing by the fire, and there—yes—there on the table, were a bonnet and shawl!

I could not speak. I merely advanced to the centre of the room, and pointed to the evidence of his depravity.

He was too astonished to speak either,

and we stood silently confronting one another for a moment. Then the door of the other room opened, and there came out—his sister Emily, a dear old thing, but rather too fond of lecturing her brother's wife.

The revulsion of feeling, the journey, the excitement, perhaps the want of dinner, took effect on me, and for about the first time in my life I fainted away. When I came back Emily had gone, and I was alone with Tom. Then, with my head on his dear broad shoulder, I told him everything—everything, and he forgave me; and that night in his old bachelor chambers was the happiest, I think, of my life.

But, readers, if you are shocked at the sad story of a woman running away from a fashionable existence to the goody-goody delights of legitimate affection, do not be cast down. My story may not be true; and, if it is, it may be looked upon as the history of an event pretty certain never to occur again among us.

THE PRIDE OF KILCLARE.

THE PRIDE OF KILCLARE.

CHAPTER I.

THE Hunt dinner at Kilmacruddery. Red coats and red noses, sparkling jokes and equally sparkling wine, long stories and long draughts at the old claret —'48 some of it, at least, so the M.F.H. says; spirited compounds and more spirited accounts of "ancient runs, devoid of truth;" great fences jumped over the mahogany, which, in the good old fashion, is stripped of its linen cover after dinner; popping, prosing, punning, and poesy.

"We must have a song," said the M.F.H.

"A song!" was the universal cry.

"I don't mind," said Mr. O'Halloran of O'Halloran; "but it's only one I made myself."

"What's the name?"

"'The Pride of Kilclare.'"

"Haven't I heard that title before?"

"No; only something very like it."

"Well, go ahead!"

O'Halloran of O'Halloran rose, and putting on an intensely sentimental face, which caused a titter among the younger men at the table, commenced in a voice none the worse for its mellow brogue:—

I.

There are sweet eyes around the land,
And honeyed words are flowing;
And men and maidens, hand-in-hand,
In moonlit walks are going:
But who can e'er
For eyes compare
With Nora—sweet Nora—
Oh, Nora! the pride of Kilclare?

II.

Her gentle words such music are,
That the angels cease from singing;
And the south winds waft their notes afar
On the balmy breezes ringing:

For who could e'er
For tones compare
With Nora—sweet Nora—
Oh, Nora! the pride of Kilclare?

III.

When she steps forth on the green earth,
The daisies bow with pleasure,
And the night-fays dance, in airy mirth,
On the raith a happier measure:
Though they could ne'er
For spells compare
With Nora—sweet Nora—
Oh, Nora! the pride of Kilclare!

IV.

But the eyes are dim we love so well,
With tears that are hateful seeing;
For a haughty Saxon bears the bell,
And our Celtic love is fleeing.
And though she cries,
She will not be wise,
And stay in her own Kilclare:
So we must e'er
With the stranger share
Our Nora—sweet Nora—
Once Nora the pride of Kilclare!

There was great rattling of glasses and thumping of knife-handles at the conclusion of the song. Dermot Desmond only evinced no admiration, but sat gloomily silent, with anger in his dark, wild eyes.

Two or three of those around had glanced at him during the song; it was evident that it was considered of especial interest for him. But he said nothing; only his hand unconsciously clutched the glass before him, as if it had been the neck of an enemy.

"That's a capital song," said one, "and embodies exactly what we all think. O'More ought to be kicked for selling his daughter to a dirty London tradesman."

"There's a big debt on the estate," said another.

"What of that? Isn't there a big debt on all our estates? To my mind there's something shabby in an estate without a big debt on it."

"Devilish little shabbiness here, then," said Dermot, speaking for the first time.

"This Englishman, Smyth—fancy an O'More turning into a Smyth!—he's going to pay off every penny of the debt, I'm told," said an elderly man at the top of the table, a magnificent specimen of the Irish

gentleman, owning some twelve thousand acres, and with nearly enough mortgage deeds to cover every acre with their parchment.

"It's a good price for an Irish girl, eh?" said Dermot, with suppressed rage. "She's doing credit to her bringing up, after all. You see there is some use in blue blood."

Several of the men looked at each other meaningly; for it was well known throughout the county that Dermot Desmond and Nora O'More had been in that semi-state of engagedness, which is only prevented from blossoming out into the real thing by lack of funds, for two or three years.

Nora was the daughter of Mr. O'More of Castle O'More, the representative of a family that traced its history back into the mists of a time when the "old families" of England had not been thought of, and Dermot, not a whit inferior to him in blood, ran him hard for equality as to the amount of encumbrances placed by careless and

hospitable ancestors upon his broad acres.

That Dermot would have married his "own love," and that they would have scraped along through debt and difficulty much as their parents had done before them, is certain, had not a quantity of the mortgages fallen into the hands of a London merchant, whose liking for sport and scenery led him to desire an Irish estate, and had not that merchant's eldest son come to the county of Kilclare, and been at once knocked over by the bright eyes of Nora, the pride of the said county.

Old Mr. Smyth cared little for his son's love affairs, and insisted on foreclosing. To lose the old property and the Castle was a sore trouble to Mr. O'More. It can scarcely be wondered that when young Smyth came forward and offered to avert this danger by means of his own fortune, which his father could not touch, the extremity of the crisis made his condition, Miss Nora's hand, seem less onerous than it might have done had

the calamity not been so great and pressing.

As to Nora, she quite agreed with her father that to save the property for the family—for young Mervyn, her brother, and those who might come after him—the sacrifice of herself and her love was not too great. Dermot was very dear to her. The idea of being his wife some day had always been in her heart; but it could not be; and she nerved herself to bear the inward pain as befitted the descendant of old Irish Kings. That the last years of her father's life should be happy was a great thing, and she almost forgot Dermot's wild passionate eyes when she heard the old man planning the wonderful things he would do when the money came, and for the first time for centuries the full rents of the estates had not to be paid away immediately after receipt at the office: how he would build new stables, and make another approach, and set up a model farm, and many other pleasant and interesting improvements.

But Dermot, half-educated and passionate, did not take things in this quiet way. At first he vowed he would have Miles Smyth's life, and was very tragic and nonsensical; then he would emigrate, which might have done him a great deal of good; then he tried to make Nora run away with him, and used very bad language when she refused, and drove the poor girl wild by making her bare her heart over and over again before him.

"You know I love you, Dermot," she said. "Why make me repeat it so often? I so love you, I would give anything almost to marry you."

"Almost!" he repeats, with a sneer.

"Yes, almost. I am called upon to sacrifice myself——"

"And me——"

"No, Dermot dear! You are a man. You will go into the world and do things and forget. You are angry and hurt now, of course; but it will soon be over. Don't

look so angry! There!—that is the last kiss I shall ever give you, for it would be wrong. Good-bye, Dermot dear! Of course, we shall often meet, but not like this again. No! I could not bear it. But for this half-hour it was pleasant to be again the Dermot and Nora of old days. But that is over now. Good-bye."

"It shall not be so!—it is not over!" he cried, passionately, holding her in his strong arms. "No one in the world shall part us, for we love one another. Your father is a selfish old fool, and only sells you for his own——".

"You shall not say those words," she said, disengaging herself and facing him angrily. "I give myself to—to Mr. Smyth of my own free will, for the sake of my family."

He gave a mirthless, bitter laugh at her hesitation over the name of her selected husband.

"So be it," he said, looking wonderfully

handsome in his scorn. "Go to your money-bags with your Smyth, and comfort yourself with the thought that you have broken the heart that loved you!"

Then he turned and left her without a look—left her alone with her sorrow.

Miles Smyth was one of those men who were nearly unknown in this country fifty years ago. He claimed no gentility other than that which was natural to him. He was proud of his position in the middle class, and, while not aspiring to be better than he was, would have been ashamed to descend one inch in the social scale. Brought up in exactly the same way as the sons of the greatest in the land, and having made many good friends of those above him, he found no difficulty, on arriving at man's estate, in understanding the nature of the gulf that divided him from them. He saw, of course, that many of his compeers built bridges of gold, cemented by flattery and tuft-hunting, which carried them across;

but he also realised how very frail these structures were, and how difficult and degrading it was to keep them in working order. Having met on a tour in Italy, after leaving college, a Christchurch friend, the Marquis of A——, he willingly joined him, and visited in his company the wonders of that sunny land; but, to the noble lord's astonishment, he said, as the steamer was nearing the harbour of Dover—

"Good-bye, my Lord!"

"My Lord! What do you mean, Miles?"

"Mr. Smyth, please. I am Mr. Smyth, of Bishopsgate Street, and you are Lord A——, of ever so many places. Your way and mine lie far apart. We have enjoyed ourselves vastly, I admit, and I am sorry it is over. But now it *is* over, I want you to understand our relative positions."

"Not a bit of it!" cried the Lord, hotly. "Such distinctions between gentlemen——"

"Are necessary and salutary," interrupt-

ed Miles. "The gentlemen argument won't wash. Any one of my labourers may be as much a gentleman at heart as I, but I don't care to make him my friend. The safety and welfare of Society depend upon keeping up the lines between classes. I have my pride, my Lord, and I should not care to go about among those superior to me, having to own and to feel their superiority every moment. I daresay it's a weakness—pride often is—but that is the fact."

"Well, you *are* a queer chap, Miles," said Lord A——, and then the steamer bumped against the pier, the scramble for bags, and umbrellas, and rugs commenced, and the two young men drifted apart, and remained apart; for Miles acted up to his opinions.

No one could say Miles Smyth was ugly, but neither could they call him handsome. Manly, self-reliant, healthy, and English-looking, he was just such a one as you may

see every day in this country; common-place, perhaps, but not such a bad specimen of manhood after all. His principles did not interfere much with his projects as to the O'More family; for, truth to tell, he looked upon their splendid ancestry as a myth, and could see no beauty or object of reverence in a rank which rested only on tradition, and which was so palpably out at elbows. Blue blood that was unconnected with influence or with money did not find much favour in his sight, and when, on his first visit to the Castle, he had suggested that young O'More—then fourteen years old—should be sent into trade, the father's indignant answer roused in him nothing but rather contemptuous amusement. He thought it quite according to a wise scheme of the universe that "the mass ought to labour," and the aristocracy "lay on soffies," as Biglow has it; but then the aristocracy must have all the attributes of their kind, and must be able to pay handsomely for their

grand indolence. The past was of very little moment to him if it had left nothing but its memory behind, and the only thing he did not fully like in Nora was her blind adoration of the traditions of her house. Her ancestors might no doubt have been, as she said, Kings of Ireland, but a King who left his descendants to live upon rabbits, screw the tenants, and plot and scheme for the decencies of life, stood about as high in Miles' estimation as a bankrupt stock-broker.

Nora scarcely understood the character of the man she had promised to marry. She exaggerated his hardness, his utilitarianism, his determined way of looking only to results, and gave him little credit for the many good qualities which his reserved nature seldom allowed him to show. It is true that he had proved himself very generous as regarded the pecuniary assistance he was to give her father; but then, the girl thought, with a pride pardonable in

such an acknowledged beauty, he was only giving a big price for an article he wanted very much; in the same way that Manchester men gave unlimited hundreds for their horses, and thousands for their pictures.

That he had tact she was forced to admit, for not even Dermot had ever got on so well with her irascible father, whose scarcely veiled contempt for the *roturier* he good-naturedly ignored; while his skill with gun and rod had already done away with all the prejudice which her little brother Mervyn had cherished against the rich Englishman.

Many people called Miles Smyth purse-proud, and, in a certain sense, no doubt with reason. He was proud of the skill, perseverance, and honesty which had raised his family from their obscure position; he was proud of being an English merchant; he was proud of having it in his power to assist his fellow-men.

To be rich was very pleasant to him, to be richer still would be pleasanter; the

measure of greatness of his class was wealth, and he was not a man to stand still when well on his way up the hill.

"When I make a big sum from a fair, sound venture," he said on one occasion, "I feel much as I suppose an earl feels when he hears the Sovereign intends to make him a marquis, or a duke when he gets the Garter, or as a day-labourer feels when he is made foreman."

Such was the man whom Nora O'More, the wild, high-spirited beauty of Kilclare, was to wed. No wonder there was much wagging of heads and utterance of gloomy prophecy among his friends and relatives in London when they heard of it; no wonder that old Mr. Smyth raged furiously, until he brought on a fit of the gout which would have done credit to the highest-fed duke in the land.

"I thought him the cleverest of the bunch," groaned the poor old gentleman, "and here he is marrying an Irish pauper

to fling away his money and look down upon him because he hadn't a barbarian king as a great-grandfather."

Nothing, however, could stop Miles Smyth when once his mind was made up; and the marriage was duly solemnised in the little church near the Castle; the bridegroom signalising his victory over the gloomy Dermot Desmond by an invitation to stay with him in South Kensington, which invitation caused that gentleman some little wonderment, mixed with a satisfaction of which we had rather not inquire the reason.

Miles had found out—no matter how—the state of affairs between the lovers, and perhaps felt that some little compensation was due to the defeated rival. As to doubting his wife, he would have as soon doubted the sun and stars, for he was a man who did not give his trust at all except in full.

CHAPTER II.

"MY DEAR," said Miles one day, entering his wife's pretty boudoir in their South Kensington House, "I hear Dermot Desmond has come to town, and is at the Euston Square Hotel. Will you write and ask him to come here, and to stay here as long as he is in London?"

Nora hesitated a moment, and then, blushing slightly, said,

"I had rather not, Miles."

"Rather not! Why, I thought he was such a friend of yours!"

"We have known each other from—from I don't know when."

"Well, all the more reason for asking him."

"Miles," said she, turning to him suddenly, "I think I had rather he didn't come here."

"Why?"

"I don't know; at least, *must* I have a reason for everything?"

"No; women need not, I believe. But in this case I think you should. At any rate, I am afraid he must be asked, if not by you, then by me; for I know he only comes to town on the strength of my invitation here—and perhaps his finances——"

"How you despise poor people!" she flashed out.

"Certainly I do not. I have perhaps no great admiration for those who are content to be poor when they are young and strong; but——"

"As if Dermot Desmond could be expected to be a clerk and sit on a three-legged stool!"

"As I do?"

"You? You are different."

"Yes, I'm only a plain, every-day kind of animal, and Desmond is the descendant of a line of kings. Nevertheless, His Majesty has consented to live a short while in his subject's house; and so the letter had better be written. Will you write it? I had rather it came from you."

"And I had rather it came from you, if it must come at all," she said, with something very like crossness in her tone.

"Don't you see, my dear," he went on, calmly, and in what Nora called his "business manner," "don't you see that it will be ever so much nicer for him to get the invitation from you? I know him very little, and I don't think he is particularly fond of me. Of course I only ask him as a friend of yours. Sit down like a good child, and tell him to come at once. We'll have some people to amuse him at dinner to-morrow."

She put her hand on his arm.

"You are really anxious I should write?"

Miles looked into her eyes for a moment, and then said, with a laugh—

"Why, what a serious business we make of it! Of course! Send the note by a messenger. And now I must be off to the City."

So Nora, as the door closed behind her husband, sat down and wrote, in her rather sprawling, but characteristic hand—

"DEAR DERMOT,

"We have only just heard you are in town. Of course you will leave that nasty hotel and come here. Your room is ready for you, and my husband begs me to say that he hopes you can come to-day. I shall be very glad to see you again.

"Yours very truly,

"NORA SMYTH."

It must not be supposed that this note was written without effort. Many copies were made, some beginning with "Dear Mr. Desmond," some "My dear Dermot,"

and some solving the initial difficulty by plunging at once *in medias res* without any commencement; but eventually she sent the one she had first written, in despair of finding any to please her better.

That last sentence was certainly too warm, but then without it the letter was decidedly too cold. If she had married twenty Mr. Smyths it would not do away with the fact that she had known Dermot all her life. Of course Miles knew how intimate they had been; she suspected he knew of the love affair; and therefore his wish to have Dermot in his house showed that he had no dislike to their intimacy.

She wondered whether he was as good-looking as ever—as she remembered him on that eventful day eighteen months ago, when she met his reproachful look as she stepped into the carriage to go forth with her new lord and master. She wondered what his manner now to her would be.

Would he accept the situation gracefully, and let them glide back into the old boy-and-girl friendship that had been so pleasant until love came in and made it—if pleasanter in some ways—still full of pains and penalties? Or would he be reproachful and gloomy, and keep the memory of her broken faith before her always? How handsome he was! how courageous! It seemed almost impossible to believe that in a few hours he would be standing there in that room, where she had spent so many dull hours of converse with the most respectable wives of City magnates.

Every time the door-bell rang her heart throbbed and her hand trembled. She would have given all she had in the world to prevent his coming; she would die if he did not come.

She hated herself for her folly, but she would not have exchanged that folly for all the wisdom of Solomon. And among the

thoughts surging in her poor little head came a dim consciousness of unworthiness—a feeling that she was base to betray, even in thought, the trust Miles had placed in her.

The awful moment arrived. "Mr. Desmond!" was announced, and, to her surprise, Nora found herself asking the usual questions about the state of the Channel, the punctuality of the trains, &c., with which we greet a traveller. Not for some time did she venture to raise her eyes and survey him.

Yes, he was as handsome as ever; perhaps not quite as much at his ease in his London clothes as he used to be in the careless garb of the country, but with a high-bred air that there was no mistaking. And then, just as Nora had settled that no one she had ever yet seen could look like this, in came Mr. Smyth, dirty and unsmart, from his office; and who could have helped comparing the two men? Miles's rather

prim, methodical manner, too, stood in marked contrast to Dermot's easy, indolent grace. Nature had taught him how to address a woman so that the most common-place remark was a compliment, and a compliment in his lips was almost a caress; but Nature had not taken the trouble to instruct him as to his demeanour to his own sex, and his manner with men he did not intimately know was generally overbearing, and sometimes offensive in its careless rudeness. Personal courage was about his only virtue, and, as Bernard Mandeville remarks, an attribute we share with wild beasts is scarcely one to be very proud of. Miles Smyth thought he had fathomed his character; and, although it was not one he liked, he gave the Irish Adonis credit for many good qualities he did not possess. He thought him generous, if spendthrift, while he was avaricious to a high degree. He thought him trusting and frank, while he was cunning and a schemer by nature.

Taking it altogether, the man who admitted a viper into the family circle did a wise thing compared with Dermot's admission into the South Kensington household.

It may be said that Nora, who was no fool, should have learned this man's character during their intimacy, but a little brilliancy in a handsome man goes a long way with even clever women, who see so often, as it were, with their hearts, and clothe with all imaginable virtues of their own invention the creature whose outward semblance has caused those hearts to flutter. And Dermot was adroit enough to conceal his bad qualities from the girl it amused him to think he loved, and whose flattery and affection were soothing to his vanity. He was ill-tempered before her sometimes, it is true, but allowed himself to be coaxed into equanimity again so nicely that Nora rather enjoyed the bursts of passion which she was called upon to quell, and was proud of her power over them. His selfish-

ness she took as a matter of course, and never ceased to pity him for lacking pleasures that so many lesser beings enjoyed.

Now, when he came to her house, her heart swelled with indignation to think that her husband should roll in riches, and that to this being—this almost demi-god—a journey from London to Dublin was a serious matter to be thought over with much calculating of resources.

The Desmonds had some relatives in high places in London, and soon Dermot's looking-glass in the little sitting-room they had fitted up for him, leading out of his bedroom, was encircled by a quantity of cards of invitation; for his looks were a sure passport. He did not become popular with men; but he cared very little for that, and revelled in the new life now, for the first time, opened to him.

"I told you he would make a sensation," said Nora, to her husband.

"Yes, and I daresay he will; probably a

very unpleasant one. Do you lend him money, Nora?"

She coloured.

"If you mean as a habit, certainly not. The other day he wanted some for a short time—just till——"

"Till his rents come in, I suppose?"

"Well, his rents do come in, don't they? I can see nothing to be sarcastic about, Miles!"

"How much did you lend him?"

"The money you give me for myself is my own, isn't it?"

"Of course it is; but I want to know how much you lent him."

"A hundred pounds."

"Oh! He's moderate at first. Look here, Nora, I don't intend this to happen again. If he wants money to go on with, let him ask me."

"Oh, he couldn't well do that, you know. He is so proud——"

"So proud that he goes to my wife

behind my back," said Miles, contemptuously.

"You forget that we are almost brother and sister."

"I forget nothing. But this I know, that if Mr. Desmond can't do without borrowing, and insists in fixing upon you to borrow from, I shall ask him to leave my house."

"And I shall ask him to stay," she cried, with her eyes flashing.

Miles smiled.

"I daresay he would stay, too. His quarters are comfortable enough here. And the living is cheap."

"I declare I believe you measure everything by your dirty money," she said, angrily.

"However dirty, I fancy it is a thing to which our friend is not averse. But listen to me. I happen to know he has been playing of late; and I'm not going to give him money, through you, to gamble away.

If he asks you for money again, Nora, I insist that you refer him to me."

When Miles put on that tone, Nora knew that it was of no use to argue, so she very wisely held her tongue.

Dermot did come to her again for the sinews of war, and was referred to her husband. Miles was very disagreeable and firm about the high whist; but, after all, as Dermot said to himself when he left Miles's study with a cheque for £500 in his pocket, promises are quite as easy to break as they are to make.

CHAPTER III.

YOU have no doubt often passed down the short street leading eastward from Arlington Street to St. James's Street without remarking a blue baize door, giving entrance into a modest, sleepy-looking house, which might pass for a decayed but genteel hotel, or the office of a languishing if honest company, say for the diffusion of morality among the upper classes; or, if you happen to have remarked the door, you have never felt the smallest inclination to pass through it and penetrate to what you no doubt suppose would be gloom and shabbiness. And yet this is the well-known Exminster Club,

named after its founder and principal patron, an evening haunt of the greatest in the land, where thousands of pounds change hands nightly, and where, from ten or eleven until the daylight is far advanced, may be heard the rattle of the dice and the smothered oaths of the losers. To be a member of the Exminster requires a good many attributes, not perhaps exactly of goodness or greatness. To be elected you must be rich, or at least be able to live as if you were rich; you must be of the best Society; and you must be fond of play. If you are very rich and very fond of play, no doubt the other qualification may sometimes be dispensed with, for, after all, it is no disgrace for a lord to ease a shopkeeper's son of money, if the shopkeeper's son knows how to lose it like a gentleman.

Some people said that the *pay* at the Exminster was not always as prompt as it should be, and that the standing—or rather running—account which some members kept

and left in the hall-porter's hands was rather a farce; but then such cavilling outsiders did not know that it was only the privileged ones who could do this: men who were absolutely certain to pay sooner or later, and whose position in Society and influence were such that no lesser beings would dare refuse to play with them. These dilatory aristocrats were a nuisance certainly, but then you must expect to pay a good price for being able to jostle the big ones of the land every night in the charming familiarity of gambling greediness. Dermot Desmond, at any rate, was willing to take his chance of being kept waiting, and perhaps one of the proudest moments of his life was when Lord Exminster slapped him on the back in Piccadilly, and told him he had been elected. Dermot was a true gambler, and nothing but his attenuated purse prevented his being a very worthy member of this noble society. However, such a trifle was not allowed to stand in his way, and, aided by Fortune for

a time, he played as if the Bank of England was at his back.

Nora was much perturbed at all this, but found herself quite unable to check his downward course; and, as he came less to South Kensington now (having removed to a lodging in St. James's), and generally timed his visits so as to avoid Miles, that gentleman scarcely ever mentioned his name, save every now and then to inquire of Nora whether he had yet returned to Ireland.

A few days after Dermot's election to the Exminster Club, he, having fortified himself by a good dinner, went through the blue baize doors for the first time, his heart beating rather quickly, determined to do or die.

He was a vain man, fond of dramatic effect, and he thought it would be well of him to commence with a flourish. So he got together all the money he could, borrowing, we are sorry to say, again from

Nora, and thereby causing her to break a promise, and, armed with this wealth, prepared to court the smiles of Fortune.

And at first he gained them. The fickle goddess, woman-like, seemed to have taken the handsome good-for-nothing under her especial protection, and murmurs of astonishment at his luck went round the room. It was not as yet the fashion to cheat at the Exminster, which was perhaps lucky for Dermot's character at that moment.

Just as he had landed a supreme *coup* at hazard, Lord Exminster, Founder and King of the Club, came in.

Lord Exminster deserves a few words of notice at our hands. Having commenced life as cadet of a great family, he had at once perceived that in the world money is power. To get money as quickly as possible was therefore the sole aim he put before him. Being a gentleman, he must be honest. That went without saying; but then people's ideas as to where the line between

honesty and its opposite should be drawn differ a good deal. Charlie Hardell—as he then was—discovered a consumptive heiress, and employed upon her all his undoubted power of fascination. There was not quite time to be married, but there was time for the infatuated girl to make a will; and when she died, her hand in her lover's, his grief was somewhat assuaged by the knowledge that he was a rich man. Some of the poor heiress's relatives were angry, but their voices were soon drowned by the hubbub the lucky legatee created in London with his stepping horses, and his good cook, and his villa at Richmond, and his hunting quarters in High Leicestershire, and his unbounded hospitality. What could be refused to such a man? A minor post in the Ministry? A peerage? Certainly not! So he got both, and looked charming on the Treasury bench of the Upper Chamber, and had lovely note-paper to write to the ladies upon with enormous coronets and

contortionate *E's*. Then, as his ambrosial locks began to thin, he for the first time contracted a vice which was not wise. He became enamoured of gambling. Rich as he was, he found this an expensive taste, and he determined to marry money. There was but little difficulty about this. Lord Exminster—he had taken his title from the estate which was left him by his heiress *fiancée*—was, if not in his first youth, still good-looking, graceful, young to all intents and purposes. What more natural than that the pretty Lady Bolserville, widow of the rich Sir Edward Bolserville, of Drangley, and mistress of his entire fortune, should fall in love with his face, his figure, and his *aristocraticalness*. Lady Bolserville was not blue-blooded herself, and reverenced the tinge like an American or a Radical.

All Lord Exminster's relatives were delighted, and received her with open arms. What a house they had in Piccadilly!

What dinners! What charming parties! What music! And his Lordship was happy, for now he could really afford to indulge in his favourite amusement, the more so as no children were born to them to suffer in the future from the perverseness of the cards. Such was the man who entered the club just as Dermont Desmond's luck seemed to have reached its summit.

"Run of luck, eh?" he said, divesting himself leisurely of his white gloves, and running one ringed hand through his side locks, which curled lovingly upwards, as if eager to cover the deficiencies of the top of his Lordship's head. "A very nice thing, a run of luck. How are you, Desmond? Congratulate you. Why, is there no more hazard?"

"No," said the man addressed. "Most of them are at baccarat in the other room, and there is a good deal of whist to-night. We're not enough for hazard, that's the fact."

"Well, Desmond," said Lord Exminster,

turning to our Irish chieftain with a courteous smile, "what do you say? Shall I try to relieve you of some of your winnings at—well, say at *écarté?*"

Now Lord Exminster was one of the finest *écarté* players in the club, capable of holding his own among Frenchmen, and Dermot played the ordinary Englishman's game, totally unenlightened as to the finer subtleties of that most deceptive of all contests of combined skill and chance.

Dermot did not like it, but he thought it would look cowardly to say "No." This was his first night at the club, he had won very largely, and it was his proposer, the monarch of the place, who desired him to play. So he said "Yes."

The result was not very long in doubt. Despite his luck, despite his frequent kings, the losings mounted steadily up.

Dermot lost his head, and played wildly. He drank brandy-and-soda, and played more wildly still.

At last his opponent stopped, just as he was about to deal, and said, "I think one rubber of five games more will be enough, Mr. Desmond."

He had called him Desmond before; but, Dermot having in his excitement become rather too familiar, the "Mister" came in again.

"Very well; but then I've no chance of getting back anything worth mentioning," said Dermot, sulkily.

Excited as he was, he was well aware that he had lost a sum which without help he could never hope to pay. In his extremity he thought of Nora, as an Italian sailor invokes the Madonna in a storm.

"You will not find me backward as to stakes, Mr. Desmond," said the other, glancing at the interested faces round the table, for the news of a big battle with Exminster, the plunger, in it, had attracted members from the other rooms, and the

baccarat had languished and died. "I did not know you wished to play higher. What do you say to five hundred a game and a thousand on the rub?"

"Rubber of five?"

"Rubber of five."

"Very well; but must it be the last?"

"As you please; but let us settle beforehand, as it is getting late. Shall we play three rubbers?"

Dermot assented—he would have assented to anything just then—wondering whether the spectators could read in his face anything of the desperation in his heart; and his opponent dealt the cards. Whether it was that Lord Exminster played better now or Dermot worse, is doubtful, but from this moment the latter never won a game; and as he threw down his last card at the conclusion of the third rubber, a loser of £7,500 on these three rubbers alone, a murmur, partly of commiseration, went round the room.

He rose from the table, his legs trembling, and called for drink.

"Never saw such luck," said one.

"Never saw such play," said another.

"He's about done," whispered a third.

"Who is he? Is he rich! Irish! sure to be poor. I suppose he'll pay. Must have lost ten thousand in the night."

Such were the remarks heard on all sides.

Lord Exminster, having made some notes with a gold pencil in a coroneted pocket-book, was about to rise, when Dermot suddenly re-appeared at the table, his face flushed and his eyes staring.

"Will you go double or quits for the whole, my Lord?" he said, in a hoarse voice.

There was a dead silence in the room, only broken by his Lordship's slow sipping of his weak sherry and water.

"It is a large stake," said he, at last,

putting down his glass, and taking his note-book from his pocket. "You owe me now £8,700, Mr. Desmond."

"Do you suppose——" began Dermot, hotly.

"I suppose nothing. Of course no gentleman in this club would risk more than he could pay."

"Of course not," said Dermot. "I know it's a large sum, and will take me a day or two, perhaps a week, to get, if I lose it, but my luck has been so infernal that——"

"You think it's time it turned," put in his Lordship, smiling. "Well, it is usual here to settle at once, but in this case—— You said a week, I think, Mr. Desmond?"

Dermot felt as if everyone there knew the state of his banker's book, as he replied, huskily,

"A week."

"Very well. I am rather sleepy, and can only play one more game—that shall

be for double or quits on the whole amount you owe me: that is, I think—yes—£17,400 or nothing."

Even for the Exminster this was a high stake; and the excitement was breathless as the game proceeded.

Dermot began by scoring the king and trick; then he made another trick. Three to nothing.

Lord Exminster made a vole.

Two to three. Dermot turned up another king, but his opponent just managed to make the trick.

Four to three. Beads of perspiration were on Dermot's brow. Only one point to get and he was saved—saved from disgrace—from ruin!

The next deal he held a hand which he thought would almost have justified him in playing without proposing. Alas! Lord Exminster held three trumps and a king, and thus easily scored the trick. Four all!

Men standing by, to whom the result was

nothing, drew their breath hard as they looked on. The calmest, coolest man there was Lord Exminster, who sipped his sherry and water, and observed,

"A pretty fight, Mr. Desmond."

The other tried to answer in a similar tone, but no word would come.

It was his Lordship's deal. Three cards to Dermot, three to himself; two to Dermot, two to himself, and then the trump card.

"King," said he, calmly turning up the king of diamonds.

"Look at Desmond's face!" whispered one of the lookers-on.

And Lord Exminster heard the whisper, and regarded his defeated enemy.

"By Gad! I hope he'll pay," muttered he, as he finished the sherry and water.

CHAPTER IV.

"HOW is your toothache, dear?" asked Miles Smyth of his wife, as she appeared at breakfast just before he started for the City.

"Oh! I scarcely feel it at all now, and that heavenly laudanum gave me some sleep last night."

"Take care you don't overdo that; I hate those narcotics," said Mr. Smyth, taking up the *Times*. "By the way, Nora, I never listen to tittle-tattle if I can help it, as you know; but I have heard rumours of that cousin of yours lately which are worse than ever. I am told he has lost large sums of money, and you know as well as I do that he cannot pay them."

Nora had heard and had mourned over these rumours too.

"If," she began, timidly—"if he has lost more than he can pay, and I believe debts of honour *must* be paid——"

"Debts of honour!" snorted her husband, over his *Times*.

"If he has, Miles dear, and if it would be ruin and disgrace to him not to pay, would you——"

Miles threw down the newspaper, and, going up to his wife's chair, laid his hand on her arm. "Listen to me once for all, Nora," he said, in that calm, firm tone she knew so well. "I detest gambling, and I am not very fond of your cousin. I look upon a man who tries to win his friend's money, when he could not pay what he risks to do so, as a common swindler, who should go to the treadmill. I have given—I believe he calls it lending—given Desmond a large sum of money already; he promised me on his honour—on his honour!

—to play no more, and I have reason to know that the very sum to obtain which he made that promise was risked over cards that night. Nothing—mind you, Nora—*nothing* shall induce me to do more for him. If people choose to stake their good money against his empty pockets without inquiry they deserve to lose. I am not bound to help them. If Desmond is at any time absolutely in want——"

"In want!"

"I will give him enough to take him back to Kilclare, where he should have stayed."

"You don't quite understand Dermot, Miles."

"I daresay not. I don't want to. I am not, perhaps, a gentleman, as they understand the word in his set, but I know what a gentleman should be. At any rate, you have married me, Nora, and know that in some things I must be obeyed. Never let

me hear a word of Desmond's gambling transactions again."

He kissed her forehead, and went to the City, leaving his wife uncertain whether to be angry or to burst into tears. There being no one to be angry with—as she was not one of those who vent their spleen upon the nearest person with splendid impartiality—she chose the latter way of relieving her feelings; and when, an hour afterwards, Dermot called, he found her with red eyes.

"Been crying?" he said, throwing himself into an arm-chair. "By Jove! I wish I could cry. Women have a grand pull over us there."

"Why should you wish to cry?" she asked, anxiously.

"Why? Shall I tell you, Nora? I'm simply done for. Utterly broken, and worse."

"Worse?"

"Yes, disgraced; but there is one way out of it."

"What do you mean?" she asked, alarmed by his tone and manner.

"Simply this. I have lost an enormous sum—nearly twenty thousand pounds—and have till next Saturday to pay. If it was till doomsday the chance would be as good. But, thank God, there is always one way for a brave man to escape disgrace!"

"You don't mean——"

"I mean that death is far easier. I mean that I will never—I swear I will never live to be pointed at as a defaulter, as a swindler. If the Desmonds are to come to an end now, it is better that the last one should show that he has—if no money—still a little courage left."

"You are raving, Dermot. Surely something can be done!"

"That is so like a woman—something be done! I have to get £20,000 before Saturday. That is what is to be done! Does it look easy?"

"£20,000!" repeated Nora. "Oh! Dermot, how could you play so high?"

"It's done now, so that question is of no use. Everyone is talking about it; and I believe they are betting, d—n them! as to whether I can pay or not."

"Oh, Dermot!" again cried Nora, and was silent.

"What do you think of doing? Would not—— Who is it to?" she asked, after a pause.

"Exminster."

"Would he not wait?"

"He has vowed that he will have me turned out of every club I belong to, and cut by everyone in London, if I don't pay by twelve o'clock on Saturday night. The idea that I can't has driven him wild with rage."

"And if you don't pay?" asked she.

"I shall take a dose that will save them the trouble of removing me from my clubs."

"Dermot, it is wicked, foolish, to talk like that!"

"Is it? But I swear by my Maker that I will do it," he said, grimly.

There was another pause, and then the man spoke.

"Your husband—do you think——"

She shook her head sadly.

"I *know* that is useless, Dermot dear."

"The stingy——" began Dermot.

"Don't abuse him," she said, coming to his side, and putting her hand on his shoulder. "He is very good to me."

"Good to you, Nora! Oh! Nora," and he seized both her hands, and looked up imploringly in her face, "save me! Save my honour! Save my life!"

"You know I would, but how?"

"There is only one way—one only that I can see. But, no, you would not consent. I must die. And it is hard to die so young!"

"Tell me what it is. If it is possible——"

"You would think it impossible."

"Try me; tell me."

"You often, you tell me, fill up your husband's cheques, and he signs them. You always were clever at imitating handwriting. Do you remember that letter we sent O'Halloran, which was supposed to be from old Miss O'Grady, demanding his hand; and how he was taken in? Miles's writing is not so difficult to copy as Miss O'Grady's, and it is only two words. Then when he finds it out what can he do? He cannot prosecute his own wife. Do you understand, Nora? His bankers would honour his cheque for £20,000 without question, or, at any rate, I could get nearly that amount on the cheque—enough to save me. Nora, I know it is wrong—I know what you think; but it is my only chance. It is for my honour, my life, I plead. You used to love me; prove some of that love remains. Save me, Nora, save me!"

Not a word did she utter, not a move-

ment did she make, during this speech. It seemed to stun her, and it was as if she were asleep that she said, at its close—

"Forgery!"

"No, not forgery in a wife. He is so rich, what is £20,000 to him? To me it is life. Do this and I shall live—live a better, a different life in my own country, away from this town and its temptations. Refuse, and I swear to you that before the sneering fellows at the club know that Dermot Desmond is a blackguard he will be a corpse!"

Still Nora neither spoke nor moved. She seemed to be thinking.

"Oh, Nora," he went on, "you are cruel! You would not abate one scruple to save the life of your old playfellow. When I am dead, you will be sorry, perhaps, that you have sacrificed me—that you have murdered me—to save £20,000."

She spoke at last, in hard, measured accents, singularly unlike her own—

"I will do it, Dermot."

"My angel! I knew you would save me! Oh, Nora!" He tried to seize her, but she rose, and waved him off with an imperious gesture.

"Go now. To-morrow is Friday. Come at two o'clock, and you shall have it."

Something in her manner awed him, and he went without a word, and was soon cantering down Rotten Row with so happy an expression on his face that those who had laid odds against his paying up felt uncomfortable.

For a long time after he had gone Nora sat alone and pondered, the same dazed look upon her face; and when her husband came home, she pleaded her toothache, and went to bed, sending her maid out for so much laudanum that Miles very nearly risked awakening her to remonstrate.

The next day was Friday, and on that morning Miles went to stay till next night with a City friend who was laid up with

gout at his place in Kent, and with whom he had important business.

"Good-bye, dear," he said to his wife, the brougham being at the door. "Take care of yourself, little woman, and get rid of that toothache. Go to the dentist, and take no more laudanum at night."

She put both her arms round his neck.

"Give me another kiss, Miles dear—another. I've been a good wife to you, Miles?"

"Why, what's the child at? You've been upset by this pain, my love."

"But say I have been a good wife, Miles!"

"Of course you have. There, darling, let me go, or I shall miss the train. Drive quick, John; only fifteen minutes to do it. Poor little thing, she's quite hysterical! All those infernal drugs!"

And so he went to Kent, and Nora to the drawing-room.

When Dermot called—punctual for once

—he was informed that Mrs. Smyth was invisible, in consequence of her toothache; but he was handed a letter, with which he seemed quite content.

* * * * * *

Saturday night. Two scenes.

SCENE I.—The Exminster Club. A quarter to twelve o'clock. A throng of members, not playing as usual, but engaged in animated converse, and all perpetually looking at the clock. At ten minutes to twelve Lord Exminster arrives, cool and vicious.

"Ten to one against his coming to time!" says a youth, with a big cigar in his mouth.

There is no response.

"Twenty to one!"

"No good, Harry. I wouldn't take any odds now. Why, there are only six minutes more."

The six minutes pass. The first chime of midnight is heard, when the door opens, and Dermot Desmond walks in. There is

dead silence as he goes straight across the room to where Lord Exminster is standing surrounded by admirers.

"Lord Exminster," he says, looking very handsome in his virtuous indignation, "I beg to pay you my debt—seventeen thousand four hundred pounds. Have the goodness to count the notes, and, if they are correct, to take my name off your club. I do not know what may be the general custom in London, but in my country we do not make bets upon the likelihood of our friends being swindlers. Good evening, gentlemen."

Verily it is a king who stalks haughtily through the abashed dandies, and leaves them to be ashamed of themselves.

Scene II.—A fine house in South Kensington. A brougham rattles up to the door, and Mr. Miles Smyth, of Bishopsgate Street, merchant, springs out, and, using his latch-key, enters. What does all this con-

fusion, this running wildly about of servants, mean? And what is Dr. Jameson doing there at this hour?

"Mrs. Smyth's toothache——" begins Miles.

"My poor friend," interrupts the doctor, taking one of Miles's hands in his—"my poor friend, Mrs. Smyth——"

"Is ill—dangerously ill?" asks Miles, breathlessly.

In the doctor's face he reads the truth, and in another moment he stands beside a form which bears still the outward semblance of human beauty, but is only a heap of clay.

There is a note for him to read when his first burst of grief is over, one part only of which we need transcribe:—

"You said I had been a good wife to you, Miles—you said so before you went—and it was the sacred truth. But he was the friend of my childhood. I could not help loving him. Try to think of me as a

good wife in after-years, and not as a woman who betrayed your trust and forged your name. That act is all I have ever done that was wrong to you, Miles. Forgive me, forgive me, and kiss me when I am dead. I cannot face your kind eyes again."

The letter is burned, and the coroner asks no disagreeable questions. An overdose of laudanum, taken by mistake to soothe the pain of toothache. And so ends the short life of the poor "Pride of Kilclare."

* * * * * *

Everyone of course knows Mr. Dermot Desmond, M.P., who was so lucky last year as to secure the hand—and fortune—of the wealthy Miss Biggins, of Bigginstown House, in S——shire. His dinners are feasts for the gods.

THE MYSTERY OF ELLABY CASTLE.

THE MYSTERY OF ELLABY CASTLE.

CHAPTER I.

THERE was nothing very extraordinary in his proposing to her. When we were all children together, young Frank Ellaby was always her favourite; and as there is only eight miles between our modest house and Ellaby Castle, our visits there were pretty frequent. The young Lord, who died just after coming of age, we never cared so much for. He was always moody and odd, his temper uncertain, his glance mistrustful. There was an air of mystery about him from which we children naturally

shrank, although in appearance he was singularly like his younger brother.

In those days Lady Halberton was alive, having been just left a widow, under very sad circumstances, for her husband died very suddenly, some said by his own hand. Old Colonel Ellaby—belonging to a generation further back—came to the Castle when the widow settled there with her two sons, and managed everything for her. I recollect him, a stern, proud-looking man, very erect and solemn, with a grand courteous manner that was intensely alarming. Frank—the second son—was as bright and cheery a youth as you could find in a long day's march, and we were all desperately fond of him, and were much grieved when, immediately after the young Lord's death (on board a sailing vessel on his voyage to Australia, we were told), Ellaby Castle was shut up, and we saw Frank—now Lord Halberton—no more.

Kate—then seventeen, and so pretty that

even I, her brother, appreciated her beauty —felt this separation a good deal, and all the more when Frank's letters suddenly ceased, after a final cold one, over which she made her pretty eyes red many times.

Still, the foundation of childish fondness having thus been laid, there was nothing very extraordinary in his proposing to her three years afterwards, when they had met perpetually in the London season. What was extraordinary, at least to me who had so often received Frank's confidences as to his determination to wed none but Kate, was the time he took to come to the point, and, when he had learned from her lips that she had never forgotten her girlish love, the strange hesitation he evinced in the matter of naming a time for making himself and her happy. There was no obstacle in their way. Our family, although untitled, was in no way inferior to his. Her fortune was as much as could reasonably be expected, and he was a rich man, with but few of

those claims upon him which often make a man with a long rent-roll far from being a man with a heavy balance at his bankers.

He had no country-place but Ellaby Castle; and the house in Grosvenor Square was furnished and ready for them. Yet he hesitated; a whole winter elapsed; the next season was half through, and still no mention of the day passed his lips. I thought my father ought to speak to him, for poor little Kate was growing silent and anxious, and congratulations were beginning to be given in a somewhat ironical tone. But my father was obdurate on this point. "Let them settle it between them," he said. "When two young people can decide so important a matter as the whole of their future lives, it certainly must be possible for them to fix upon the mere detail of a date."

Frank and I were walking home from a ball one night, enjoying that cigar which tastes so delicious after hours of hot rooms, when he suddenly said to me—

"Charlie, is Kate at all nervous?"

"How do you mean?"

"Afraid of—ghosts and things."

"Well, I don't know. Not more than most women, I suppose. Are you thinking of the Ellaby ghost?"

"Yes; you see I am bound by will, as well as by the wishes of my mother and my uncle, to go and live there. And that ghost is real, you know."

"A ghost cannot be real," I replied, valiantly, relying upon my common sense. He sighed, then suddenly stopped and faced me. "I tell you it is real, this one. It is our curse, and whoever marries me will have to bear it. Do you think your sister is brave enough?"

"Oh! she's not superstitious," I said, moving on; "and I didn't think that you were, either."

He looked very serious as he laid his hand on my arm.

"Charlie, you can't laugh this away.

There is a sad secret attached to us, which I can't tell anyone. I wish to God I did not know it myself; but I am not superstitious when I tell you that anyone who marries me will have to be brave—and to be silent."

"What, will Kate know the secret when you are married?" I asked, overcoming with difficulty my disposition to laugh at his long face. "If so, I shall know it too, for Kate never could keep anything from me long."

"I hope she may never know it—I trust not," he said, as pale as a ghost himself. "But I tremble when I think of the chances. Do you think she—she is fond of me, Charlie?"

"Fond of you?" I echoed, puzzled. "Of course she is. Why, she has never thought of anyone else since she was in short petticoats."

"I have behaved ill to her, perhaps I ought to have kept away, never exposed

her to this; but I *couldn't* do it." This was half to himself, and I said nothing, for I began to think Frank had been drinking too much of the doubtful ball champagne.

"Will you tell Kate I shall call before lunch to-morrow to have a talk to her. She won't mind missing her ride for once."

"I think she can manage to exist without it," I replied, and we parted.

Next day there was a long conference between the interesting couple, and Kate came to lunch looking rather excited and red-eyed.

"Well, have you fixed the day yet?" I asked, catching her on her way to her room, and detaining her by main force.

"Let me go, Charlie," she cried, struggling; "you shouldn't be so curious. Let me go."

"But tell me, dear, have you?"

"Perhaps," was the enigmatical reply,

and with that I was forced to be content. She never could keep anything from me long, however, and soon I learnt that Frank had talked to her much in the same way as he had to me the night before; told her that she would have much to bear as his wife; and whatever happened at Ellaby they would still have to live there a great part of the year, and bear it; that there was a horrible secret, which he hoped she might never discover, but that, if she did discover it, she would have to swear never to reveal it; and then he had asked her to take a week to think it all over, and finally to decide whether she would venture to marry him, knowing this.

Kate was a nervous little thing, and I think she was rather appalled at the prospect; but of course at the end of the week her mind was made up, and the marriage day was finally fixed.

It was a very cheery wedding at St. George's, Hanover Square. Breakfast at

our house in Eaton Place—plenty of favours and old shoes, and cake, and champagne, and cheering, and a speech from a Bishop—all quite as it should be. I thought Frank looked rather pale and solemn; but no doubt that was correct. And as to Kate, with "a smile on her lip and a tear in her eye" as she bade us good-bye and jumped into the carriage amid a shower of old shoes, she was perfectly delicious. I knocked Frank's servant's hat off with *my* shoe, which amused the maids looking out of the upstairs windows amazingly.

Of course, as there is nothing so trying to the temper and altogether uncomfortable as travelling with a heap of luggage and servants, and smart new clothes, which label you unmistakably "newly married," they went to the Continent. Perhaps the cause of this mysterious custom is that it is considered best that the two young people should begin by seeing the worst side of each other's characters at once. I do not

know; I merely throw it out as a suggestion. For I have never been married, and I do not intend to be.

There were great rejoicings at Ellaby when they came back, a month afterwards; but my military duties in London tied me by the leg, and I had to content myself with reading a full account of it in the county paper while surveying Pall Mall from the windows of the Guards' Club, clad in Her Majesty's livery of scarlet.

Kate wrote to me from time to time. At first her writing was full of the delights of the place; the big woods, the lake, the garden, the horses and dogs, and the grim, quaint old castle, with its portcullis and banqueting-hall, and dungeons, and the rest of it. But gradually this tone died out of her letters, which, to tell the truth, became dull and almost cold. She rarely said a word now about Frank and her happiness with him, or about the place she had at first taken so great an interest in. Her chief

delight seemed to consist in riding out to see her father; and when he left for the south of France, ordered there by the doctor, she scarcely filled two sheets of the weekly letter she had agreed to write. What with duty, and a little racing, and a couple of horses I kept at Leighton Buzzard, I had a good deal to do, and did not attach the importance to this that I might have done; for the friendship and confidence between my little sister and myself were stronger than is usual between relations. At last—I remember it was on my return from a capital day with Mr. Lowndes—I got this short note from her:—

"DARLING CHARLIE,

"I can bear it no longer. Oh, it is so horrible! and he will not come away, but says it must be borne. Do get leave and come here and see me—I want you so badly.

"Your affectionate sister,

"KATE."

"Important family business?" said the Colonel, when I visited him next morning in the orderly room. "Well, I suppose you must go, though if you transact family business in the same way that you command your company I scarcely think you will be of much use."

The Colonel was sarcastic, but he was a good fellow all the same, *if* you took him in the right way. Most people *are* good, by the by, if you take them in the right way. I know I am. My journey down to ——shire was unpleasant, as the smoking-carriages were full, and an old boy who travelled with me—I think he was a dean, judging from his legs—objected to tobacco, and even objected when I told him what I paid for my cigars. He seemed to think that all tobacco is the same, on the same principle as, I daresay, he thought all people who did not agree with his theological opinions were bad people. He read the *Contemporary Review* and grunted for at

least two hundred miles, but at last fell into a sweet sleep, during which I managed to smoke at least half a cigar, and felt happier.

Kate was much changed even in the few months that had elapsed since I saw her. Her cheeks were pale, and there were black marks under her eyes. Frank was in the drawing-room when I came in, so of course no confidences passed between her and me that night; but Frank, while we smoked before going to bed, told me that he was very anxious about her.

"Is it the ghost?" I asked.

He started and looked uneasily at me.

"Who told you about the ghost?"

"Why, you did, long ago. Haven't you managed to lay it yet?"

"Don't joke about it here," said he, glancing over his shoulder, and making even me feel nervous, so alarmed did he look.

"Tell me, has she written to you? did

she ask you to come here for any particular reason?"

"Well, she seemed by her letter to be rather uncomfortable about something, and she didn't think you sympathized with her. You see, women all like sympathy," I added, with the wisdom of two-and-twenty.

"Poor child!" he said, half to himself. "Poor child! But I warned her. Look here, Charlie, you are in her full confidence, and I know she trusts you more than she does me. Now, can you not try to persuade her to-morrow to be brave, and to bear it a little longer without asking questions, and without mistrusting me? It may not be for long."

"Oh, it's not a perpetual ghost, then. I'm glad I've come before it's faded away."

"You are the first stranger that has stayed in this house since—since my brother's death, and——"

I interrupted, "That accounts pretty well

for Kate's not being happy. Women can't do without society, you know."

"Yes, it seems cruel of me; but what can I do? Oh, Charlie, if you only knew what I have to bear! But we won't sit up any later; it's trying to the nerves. Good night. You know your room. Don't be frightened if you hear noises in the night. The wind plays all sorts of pranks in this old house; and the ghost won't come your way."

He tried to smile as he said this, and as he lit our candles I noticed that even the strong glass of brandy and water he had just swallowed had failed to steady his hand.

"Sitting up trying to the nerves—noises in the night!" I went to my room pondering over these things, and wondering what had changed my laughing little sister so quickly, and converted strong-minded Frank Halberton into a nervous, superstitious donkey. That a grown-up man should be frightened by a ghost seemed to me incredi-

ble; for even Dr. Johnson's belief in them was not enough to shake my incredulity. My room was at the end of a long corridor which, at its other end, communicated, through two baize doors, with the principal gallery of the house; which gallery ran all the way round a square courtyard in the middle of the Castle. This gallery was lighted by mullioned windows looking into the courtyard; but you could not see out of them, as their lower part was filled with dark-stained glass. I remembered, in the odd way children remember unimportant incidents, that once, when we were going over the Castle in old days, my father had remarked that this stained glass darkened the gallery too much and should be removed, and I remembered the extraordinary sternness with which old Colonel Ellaby had replied that they liked everything there just as it was, and that the stained glass should never be removed.

In the midst of my reminiscences and

wanderings I fell asleep, and it would have taken more noise than any wind could make to rouse me, until I found my servant gently shaking my arm, assuring me, with the same useful mendacity he employed as to parade being "fallen in, sir," that breakfast was already commenced.

He was a loquacious gentleman, and informed me, when, after ablution, I rang for him to assist in my *toilette*, that things were very "odd and queer" at the Castle; that, except two old servants and a strange man, who called himself groom of the chambers, but who apparently did nothing but sleep, no domestic would stay there over their month. He said the night was made constantly hideous by horrible shrieks and cries of a most ghostly nature; and that, besides this, there existed a most obnoxious rule that every servant's door must be locked on the outside at night.

"Most dangerous in case of fire," as my man observed.

"Yours was so too, sir," he said, when I had expressed my concurrence with his views on this matter.

"Mine! What do you mean?"

"The key outside was turned in the lock when I came to call you this morning."

"Hang it! That's rather strong. I must stop that at once."

"It's the rule here, sir. I *am* told that her Ladyship is locked in too."

"Nonsense, Simmons! Don't believe what you hear," I exclaimed, angrily; and I proceeded to the dining-room more puzzled than ever.

"Look here, Frank," I said at once, after providing myself with a substantial helping of kidneys *sautés;* "this won't do. I'm not going to be locked into my room at night like a prisoner."

Kate looked up with terror in her eyes—first at me and then at her husband, who answered, solemnly—

"I ought to have told you, Charlie, but I

forgot to. I am sorry, but it is the absolute rule here, which I can break for *no one.* You need not be afraid of any danger. There are persons always ready to unlock the doors if necessary, but locked they must be."

"Oh, come, you know——" I began, rather angrily, when Kate interrupted me.

"You won't mind for a few days, Charlie —to please me."

"Oh, if you put it in that way!" I replied, still bubbling over with annoyance; "but it's a most extraordinary thing."

"It is," said Frank; "it is; but I can't help it. I am afraid it is not the only extraordinary thing here."

"They are all locked," whispered Kate, putting her hand on mine; "even mine is."

"And his?" I asked, nodding towards Frank, who was helping himself at the side table.

"I don't know—I think not. He is

scarcely ever in bed at night—always roaming about the house."

"Enough to make any man nervous," I thought to myself, as I proceeded with my breakfast. "It certainly is not very cheery at Ellaby Castle. Frank is reserved, silent, evidently unhappy, while Kate is a different being from what I knew her. Her constant glances at her husband bespeak something akin to terror. The shadow of this wretched secret, or ghost, or whatever it is, seems to have blighted their lives."

"Have you seen it?" I asked her, when at last we were alone in her little boudoir, the only comfortable, home-like room in the whole of the grim old house.

"The ghost? No. But the noises at night! Oh, Charlie! you don't know how horrible they are. Yells and curses, and strugglings; and then there are always people moving stealthily about and doors being cautiously opened—and Frank is so *odd*. Every night he goes away after every-

one has gone to bed, and comes back in an hour or two, looking so pale and strange, and he gets more and more low and unhappy. It's horrible that there should be a secret between us—and such a one. Do you think—is it possible?—that all these horrors have a little unsettled him?"

"I never knew a saner fellow than Frank till now," I answered. "But what can he want to do with the ghost? and why should we all be locked in?"

"I've asked him a hundred times, but he will tell me nothing, but says that, if I knew all, I should be miserable—as if I could be more so than I am."

"Can't you leave Ellaby for a time?"

"No. He says he is bound by a solemn vow to stay here. There are nothing but solemn vows and mysteries here, I think—it drives me mad!"

And she rested her head on my shoulder and cried hysterically. Although it was sad to see the poor child so unhappy, and

pitiable that Frank could make such a fool of himself, there was, at the same time, something rather interesting and amusing about the whole affair. Perhaps I was to be the person to discover, and, by discovering, to banish this mystery—to lay for ever this very inconvenient ghost.

I had often heard of ghosts that *would* enter your chamber and haunt you, no matter how thick the door or how firm the lock; but here was a ghost that was so averse to being seen that human beings had to be locked out of sight. I determined to guess the riddle, and of course my first thought was to secure the key of my door. But this was of no avail. The mysterious gaoler had duplicate keys, and, as he left the one he used in the lock, I could not get mine in on the inside. I fell asleep soon after this defeat, and again failed to hear anything of the noises. In the morning I secured the second key, but during the day (while I was out shooting with Frank, and

had fair sport, Frank astonishing me by shooting very ill), a bolt was screwed into the outside of the door, and again, for the third time, I was prisoner for the night.

The fourth night I sat up, and, when I heard footsteps approaching, I went out into the passage and confronted my host.

"You do not like our rules, Charlie," he said, quite calmly. "But you need not stay here. Take my advice, and leave this plague-stricken house."

"And leave my sister to——" I began.

"She chose it deliberately," he replied, and there was a tone of authority in his voice I had seldom heard before. "All was put before her, even this locking of the doors. I am wretched to see she is unhappy, but I have a duty to perform, and nothing can stand in its way."

"I know one thing," I said, standing so that he could not close my door, "and that is that I will not be locked in."

"Charlie," said he, gently, laying his

hand on my arm, "you have chosen to come to my house—you yourself have voluntarily, for the time, put yourself under the rules of that house. I must ask you to obey them. You are free to go where you will, but while you are here I must demand as a right—nay, Charlie, I will ask it only as a great favour to me—that you will let me carry out this rule."

"Is this—this Thing—so horrible, then?" I asked, curiosity getting the better of indignation, "that no one can be allowed to see it?"

"It is indeed."

"And yet you can roam about the house and meet it?"

"I said I had a duty to do. Do you think I would not rather be in bed? Do you think it is a pleasure to me to——"

He stopped, and appeared to listen intently. In the distance I thought I heard the clank of a chain, and there was the distinct sound of the closing of a door.

"Go in, Charlie; go in," he whispered, and I could see, by the light of the flat candle he carried, the beads of perspiration on his brow. "For God's sake go in!"

His tone of entreaty was so piteous that I moved a step backwards to obey him. As I did so there arose, echoing through the corridors and halls of the old Castle, a shriek more horrible than can be described, scarcely human, whether of agony or rage you could not tell—a shriek that reminded me more than anything of the cry of a man stricken by epilepsy. It was followed by the same rattling of chains I had heard before. Then all was silence.

"Go in," whispered Frank, again. Then, seizing his opportunity, he gave me a push that sent me well into the room, and, banging the door, had bolted it before I had time to put my foot against it. I heard him walking swiftly down the passage, heard the baize door at the end swing open and

close again, there were more shrieks in the distance, and then—silence.

I felt no fear, only anger with my brother-in-law for playing me this trick; and I determined to get out if I could.

It was a bright, moonlight night, and, craning my head out of the window, I saw that, about four feet below, there was a narrow stone ledge which ran all along that side of the house.

The room next to mine was empty; consequently there was little chance of the door of it being locked. It seemed possible to climb out upon the ledge, and, if the window of that room could be opened, I might get in by it and be free. The difficulty was to keep my balance on the narrow ledge, as there was nothing for a space of about five feet to lay hold of. Taking off my boots, so that I might be less liable to slip, I got cautiously out, and, pressing my face and breast against the cold stone, I made three side steps, and, just as I felt

myself falling backwards, contrived to grasp the iron bar of the window of the empty room. It was not bolted, and in another moment I stood inside. As I thought, the door was open, and I stepped out into the dark corridor none the worse save for a torn trouser-knee and with my heart beating rather quicker than its wont.

CHAPTER II.

WHATEVER the intentions of the writer may be, *litera scripta manet*, I know, so I must just mention, once for all, that this story was put on paper for the sake only of myself and a few of my intimate friends, and was not intended for the public gaze and criticism. There is no attempt at fine writing in it; it simply puts down what actually happened to me during my eventful visit to Ellaby.

* * * * * *

I have said that, when I began my dark walk up that long corridor, my heart was thumping rather loudly against my ribs, and I am not ashamed to own it. That shriek

would have discomposed the strongest nerve. I think, however, that a determination to see this affair through, to get at the bottom of the "mystery" which was wearing my sister's life away, was the strongest feeling in my mind. All was still as I walked along, and there seemed even something *uncanny* in my own noiseless footfall, for I was without boots. I coughed to re-assure myself; but the way in which that unlucky cough echoed along the vaulted roof was certainly not re-assuring.

The baize doors I opened and shut with immense care, and contrived to slip through without making the slightest sound. Now I was in the principal gallery, lit, as I have said, from the courtyard, and running quite round it, supported on pillars, which formed a sort of cloisters beneath. The moon shone in, and made the faces of some of the Ellaby ancestors look very ghostly and forbidding. I looked steadily at one, to assure myself that his eyes did *not* follow me; and then I

imagined I saw his lips move. "This will never do," I said, angrily, to myself. "What are you thinking of, Charlie, my boy?—afraid of your own shadow!" I do not think I had ever known what it was to be nervous until that moment; but then the scream I had heard! I could not forget that!

What a length that side of the gallery seemed! Not that there was any object in turning the corner, but I had a vague notion that I should be happier where the moon did not shine, and where the shadows of such common-place things as chairs and tables did not assume such fantastic shapes. There was a door leading to the north gallery —a large folding-door, some nine feet high, with an immense brass handle about level with your chin. I slipped through as noiselessly as possible, and as I carefully closed the door, close to me, in the courtyard under the window, arose another of those unearthly yells, followed by guttural mut-

terings and a noise as of some one dancing upon the stone pavement. Then came a laugh—a demoniacal laugh which froze my blood—and then all was silent.

I tried in vain to look through the stained glass of the window, and then, remembering that it only reached a few feet up, I mounted on a chair and looked out.

The moon was behind one of the clouds flying across the sky, for it was blowing half a gale, and I could make out nothing but a dark object in one corner of the courtyard, which I fancied moved slightly as I watched it. In a few moments, which seemed like hours, and during which my heart beat so loudly that I feared it would raise an echo, the cloud passed away, and I could see clearly.

The dark object was a man, clad in a long cloak, kneeling down and trying apparently to tear up one of the flags which formed the pavement. On the opposite

side of the court, half-hidden by the shadow of the pillar, stood three other men, who seemed to be watching the crouching figure.

Suddenly it raised itself, and, flinging up its arms, gave vent to one of those screams I had heard before and, flinging its arms high in air, commenced a sort of dance. The three figures in the shadow never moved, and for I suppose some three minutes this weird dance continued, to which the shrieks and horrible laughter formed a dreadful accompaniment. I do not know whether *fear* was what I felt; but I do know that a cold perspiration bathed my face, and that my legs trembled under me, as I watched.

The dance suddenly ceased, and, with a wild cry, the figure sprang at the nearest of the men watching it. There was a confused struggle, in which the other two men took part, and I thought I could see, in the moonlight, the glitter of the chains whose

rattle I plainly heard; and then round and round the courtyard went a strange procession—two of the watchers holding the figure that had been dancing, and the third slowly marching behind them. Round and round the yard till I grew dizzy from watching them; while ever and again came a shriek from the man in the cloak which made my blood run cold.

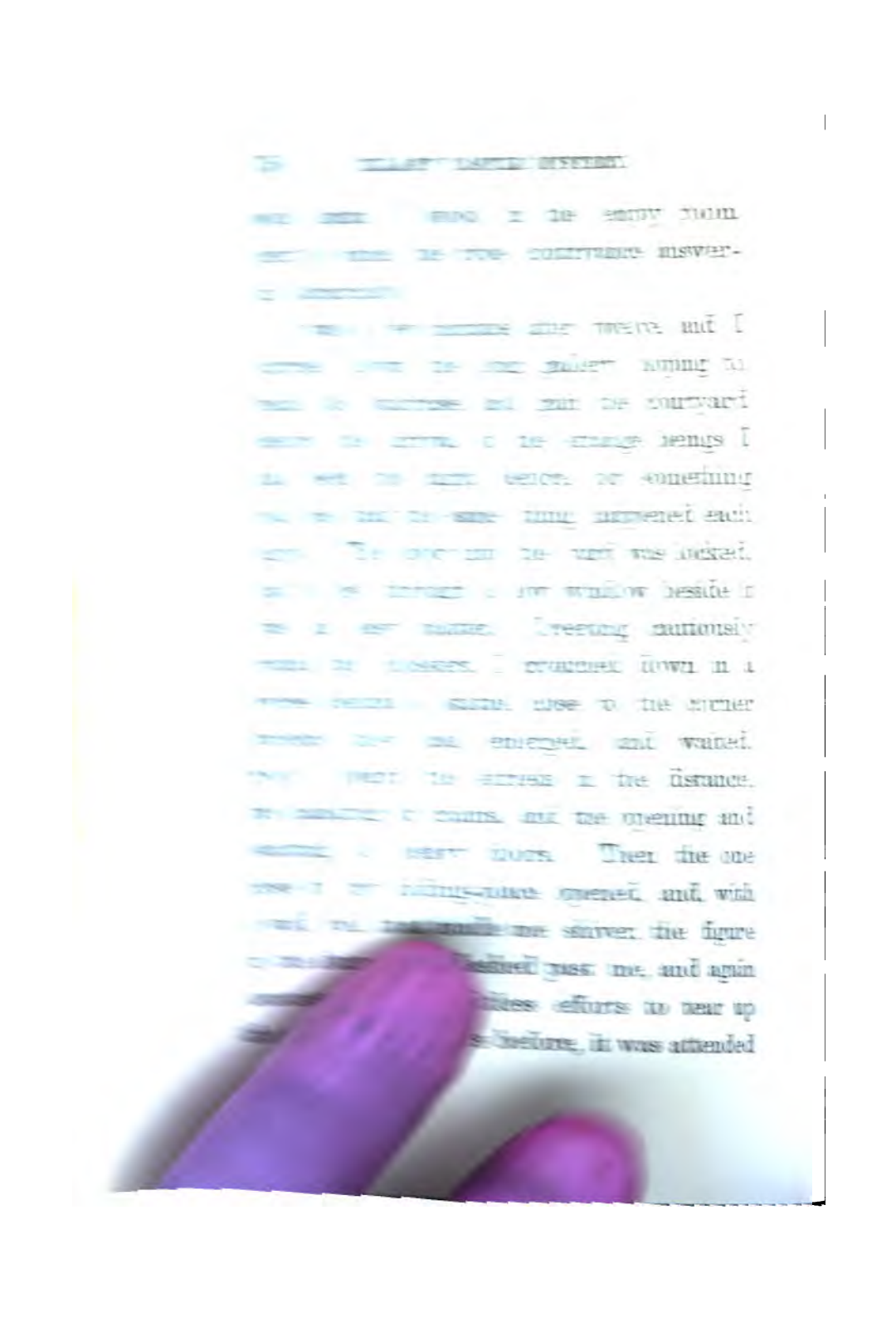
I suppose that I must have stood there nearly an hour watching them before they disappeared under the pillars, on the south side of the house, and the courtyard no longer echoed with the dreadful cries. Still I heard them in the distance, growing gradually fainter, and eventually ceasing altogether, after I had distinctly heard the banging of a door. I waited some ten minutes longer, but they did not return, and I got off the chair more puzzled than ever. As I turned to retrace my steps to my own room I heard the door at the end of the gallery open, and I saw a light

appear. Crouching into the recess of the window, I waited, and soon the butler, with a candle in one hand and in the other a plate containing meat and bread, came slowly past me. As he passed I saw the neck of a bottle protruding from his pocket.

Everything connected itself so much in my mind now with what I had seen that no thoughts of peculation or amorous irregularities crossed it, and I determined to follow him. But when I reached the small door through which he left the gallery I found it locked on the inside. So nothing remained but to return to bed, which, after performing the same gymnastic feat as before to reach my window, I proceeded to do; and, after some hours of thought, during which the sweet light of morning came in and sent all ghostly fears to the deuce, I went to sleep, as far as ever from solving the mystery of Ellaby Castle. The

next day I employed myself in making a neat arrangement of ropes, by which I could with less risk to my neck climb from my window to that of the room next door. Frank seemed much relieved at my making no more objection to be locked in at night; and Kate was delighted when I told her that I intended to stay on with them to the end of the week's leave I had obtained from my sarcastic colonel. The dinner that night was as dull as ever—Kate silent, watching her husband with the same odd look I had before observed—Frank restless, pre-occupied, and now and then putting on a false air of mirth that was worse than his natural gloom.

At last Kate lit her candle, and we adjourned for a silent smoke. Again my host drank brandy eagerly, and in a manner totally at variance with his usual sober habits; again I heard the lock turned in my door an hour or so after I had retired; and



by three other men, who stood silently watching its antics, one of them so close to me that I could have touched him. The strange creature kneeling in the centre of the courtyard gave vent at intervals to most fiendish chucklings and laughter, though after awhile, as if infuriated by the failure to move the stone, it raised itself and emitted one of those unearthly yells, and I could hear the gnashing of its teeth.

Then began that species of dance, the arms high above the head, the fingers cracking, the cloak waving in the wind, while the shrieks were incessant. As in its round of the courtyard it passed the man who stood close to me, with a sudden leap it was upon him, and I saw one of its hands clutch him by the throat. In a second the other two had seized it and torn it off him; and then commenced the strange promenade round and round the yard, and I could see that the wrists of him in the long cloak were imprisoned by handcuffs.

It was again a wild, stormy night, and the moon only gave fitful gleams of light. In one of these, however, as the four men turned and faced me at the end of the court, I could see them plainly for the first time; but my eyes were riveted on the features of one, the awful creature uttering howls like a furious wild beast! Good God! it was no other than Frank Halberton himself!

CHAPTER III.

I SCARCELY know how I got back to my room that night. The discovery I had made was so fearful that it almost deprived me of the power of thought. My sister was married to a raging lunatic! True he seemed sane enough in the day, except as regarded this "mystery"—save the mark!—but at night! I tried to remember instances of people going mad only after sunset, but could think of nothing but some vague notion of the full moon having an effect upon madmen. But this shrieking at night had gone on for months, and the moon could not have been full all that time. Of one thing I was determined:

Kate must at once leave this dreadful house and fly to the safety of her own home. Not a wink did I sleep, but lay torturing myself with plans until the gong sounded, which told us it was time for prayers. To think of the man I had seen last night dancing wildly in the moonlight, and trying to murder his keepers, solemnly reading prayers to his household in the morning! It was like an impossibly hideous dream. Kate and I were equally late, and both entered the dining-room at the same time. Frank was reading the *Times*, and carelessly turned to kiss her cheek. Horrible! I half expected to see him clutch her throat, or to hear his teeth gnash together as they had not many hours ago. For nearly the first time in my life I could eat no breakfast. Frank remarked it, and said, sadly,

"You see, Kate, Charlie already feels the influence of the place. He looks pale and worried, and eats nothing."

"Oh! I'm all right, I said, hastily. "Only had a sleepless night." I looked at him as I spoke, but he did not change colour.

"Sleepless nights are very trying," he said, taking up the *Times* again.

Soon afterwards he came into the library, where I was trying to compose myself sufficiently to write a letter to my groom about the horses, and asked me whether I would like to shoot.

"No, thanks; I don't care about it," I said, rather to his surprise—and then I went on, for I like coming to the point at once, "I say, Frank, of course I should hate to do anything to hurt you, but Kate is not happy here."

"I fear not."

"She ought not to be made so miserable."

"It may—it must—be soon over," he muttered, sinking wearily into a chair, and covering his eyes with his hand.

"Do you mean you do not expect to live long?" I asked, for his manner, knowing what I did, irritated me.

He looked at me surprised.

"No—I hope I may live—but yet—what is it that you are driving at, Charlie?"

"I think Kate should go away from this place," I said, standing up.

"You mean from me?" he asked, standing up too, and looking very pale.

"Yes—if it must be so. This life will kill her—she is simply fading away now. If you love her——"

"If!"

"You should let her go."

"Does she wish it?"

"That is nothing," I answered, angrily. "*You know* she ought to go."

"If she desires to leave me," he said, slowly, "to leave me alone here, I will not stand in her way. Here she is—ask her."

Kate came in as he spoke, and stopped short when she saw our serious faces.

"Kate, come here," said Frank, taking her hand, and looking tenderly into her face, no madness in his eyes now; "Charlie says that you are pining away, that you ought to leave Ellaby——"

"Oh! yes, Frank. Let us——"

"Leave Ellaby, *and me*," he went on, with sad emphasis.

"Leave you!" Kate said, looking at me. "What do you mean, Charlie?"

"I mean that your living any longer here with your husband is out of the question," I said, sternly, for I detest a scene; "and your husband knows it is so."

"Do you, Frank?" She was holding his hand in both hers now, and looking at me with something like defiance in her eyes.

"I don't quite know what he means," said her husband, calmly. "I only know that if you cannot bear this life—which Providence may, in its mercy, change before long—you are free to go, to leave me to bear it alone."

"Never, Frank!" cried Kate, burying her head on his shoulder; "never! I love you, and will always stay with you. The horrors would be less if we could only share them between us."

"My poor darling!" he said, raising her face to his, and looking into her tearful eyes; then, turning to me, "I wish we could. You see what she says, Charlie."

"Yes, but she does not know all."

He started.

"All? Do you?"

I saw that I had made a false move. I must be a little surer of my ground before I could speak out.

"I only know," I answered, "that there is some wretched secret in this house which renders her life miserable, which is ruining her health, which——"

Kate interrupted me.

"You must not interfere between my husband and me," she said, rather haughtily. "No doubt you meant it for the best,

but you had no right to speak like this."

I knew not what to say, so held my peace.

"We are friends still?" asked Frank, holding out his hand.

I could not take it, the scene of last night came so vividly before me, and I turned away and left the room. As I went I heard him say softly to my sister, who was in his arms,

"Be brave, my darling! We shall be happy some day, when all this is over. Be brave!"

I think they were both surprised when I expressed my determination to adhere to my original plans and finish my week with them; for, of course, we were all more uncomfortable than ever together now. But I was resolved to visit the courtyard once more before I made a final effort to rescue my sister from the danger she was in.

Frank did not come to the smoking-room to-night, which was a relief to me,

and, after a solitary pipe, I betook myself to my room, and was soon securely locked in.

Practice had made me very perfect in the use of my rope balcony, and, armed with a leaded stick I found in the hall, I was soon in the courtyard again. The same scene as on the other nights commenced at the same hour, but this time I hid myself so that when the strange figures entered I was able to slip through the door whence they emerged. It led down a narrow passage, along which I groped my way to a small winding stone staircase, feebly lit by narrow slits in the thick wall. Down this I went cautiously, my heart beating at the thought of what might come of my temerity; at the bottom the light entirely ceased, and I could only feel that there was a narrow door of immense thickness, covered with bolts and bars, and inside this another, both of them being ajar. I knew that I must be down

in the old dungeons of the castle, about which our nurses used to tell us horrible tales as children; and here—for the darkness was so intense I dared go no further forward—I determined to await the return of those in the courtyard. I heard the shrieks in the distance, and once or twice I "pulled myself together," as I imagined that they were approaching me.

At last it was no imagination. They were unquestionably coming closer and closer. I heard a door shut—the clanking of chains—the mutterings and ravings of the lunatic; and then a dark form came with a rush towards me, and a yell sounded close in my ears. I shrank back through both the thick doors, and crouched down in the darkness in what seemed to be the corner of a small room. There was a carpet on the floor, and the wall was covered with some thick substance; I heard the gnashing of teeth close to me, and there

was a confused struggle and a sound like the snapping of a lock—the lock of the handcuffs, I suppose.

Then, before I had time to make up my mind what to do, the ponderous door was shut with a bang; I heard the bolts shot and the keys turned, then the closing of the outside door—and I was alone. No! the silence lasted only for a moment. Then arose from my side another of those dreadful shrieks, and a sickly light coming from a small window high above enabled me, now that my eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom, to see a dark figure crouching, much as I was, close to me.

I was alone with the madman! How long it was that I sat there watching what was as yet little more than a confused heap of black, I know not; it seemed ages. Then, as the morning broke, I realised that, small as the window was, there would soon be light enough for him to see me. I am young and strong, but stories of the strength

of madmen flashed across my memory, and I had been witness to the difficulty with which three men subdued this one in his violent fits. I clutched my stick and prepared for the worst, mentally anathematizing the foolish rashness that had led me into this predicament. A horrible laugh rang through the room, and I shivered. Then *it* spoke—

"Dead—dead! She's dead, I tell you, and can tell no tales. The knife went in deep enough; look at her throat—from ear to ear! Down with her! Bury her deep, under the flags! Ho! ho! we'll walk over her head; keep her down—down! Quick! Was that a light? Quick! put her in, head foremost! She can dance on her head then. Is that a foot sticking out? Down with it! more earth! Why, it comes up again! Oh!"

He ended with a long-drawn scream of mortal terror, and started up. As he did so, he caught sight of me, and stood still, as

if petrified, his glaring eyes fixed upon my face. So we remained for minutes, neither of us moving; then suddenly he dropped upon his hands and knees, and looked like a dog about to spring upon a foe. His lips were curled up dog-like, and displayed his teeth, and his matted hair almost, but not quite, hid the fearful stare of his wild eyes. I did not dare to move lest he should spring upon me, and nearly an hour must have passed while we thus confronted one another. The light grew stronger, and I saw that, although strangely like him, it was not Frank Halberton. No!—wonder of wonders!—it was the elder, Geoffrey, whom we had thought dead so long!

At last he turned his eyes from me, and, to my inexpressible relief, turned over on his side with a moan, and went to sleep. I looked hastily around: there was no cord or chain—nothing with which I might contrive to bind him ere he woke. The room, or cell, was plainly but comfortably fur-

nished. A bed in one corner, and on a table the remains of a meal. Cushions on the floor formed the only seats, and the walls were thickly padded with leather. There was no chance of escape: the cell was fully fifteen feet high, and the window was close to the ceiling. No, I must remain there, face to face with this terrible creature, until the night came, for I felt sure that he was only visited once in the twenty-four hours. Five o'clock! At least seventeen hours to pass in this horrible prison. At last I fell asleep, worn out with fatigue and excitement, and woke with a start, to find that I was being watched furtively by the madman, who was now only feigning sleep, and that he had crept close to me while I slept. No pen could ever describe the horrors of that long day. Each time I took my eye off him he moved an inch or two nearer to me, until at length I could have touched him with my hand. At last—it had grown almost dark again—he

rose to his full height, and I prepared for a struggle for life. No! He turned to the table, and seizing what remained of a leg of mutton he tore it with his teeth and worried it like an animal. The malicious glitter in his eyes, which he turned on me from time to time, warned me to be on my guard. I was standing up now, and held my stick so that he could see it firmly in my hand.

Fancying I heard the noise of an opening door, I turned away from him for an instant, and he was upon me. With both hands he clutched my throat, and I felt his hot breath upon me as he gibbered in my face. In vain I struggled with him; my strength was puny compared with his. I lost my footing, and he fell with me, never relinquishing his murderous clutch of my throat. My eyes seemed to be starting from their sockets; I ceased to struggle—I was suffocating—dying—and then all was dark.

* * * * * *

"There, he is coming to now! His eyes are opening. How do you feel, Charlie?"

It was Frank bending over me. I was in my own room, in bed. Had it all been a hideous dream?

I suppose I said this aloud, for Frank answered—

"I wish it was a dream. You have had a narrow escape. How you got there I cannot understand; but now, when you are well enough, you must know all."

The shock had been terrible, but my youth stood me in good stead, and I soon was able to get up and go about again. Then I heard the whole story, which was shortly this. Geoffrey Ellaby had committed a crime so heinous that, could it have been made public, no expiation would have been possible, and there was one witness to it—a maid-servant in the castle named Ellen Grey. She was a mercenary girl and often threatened exposure. One night Geoffrey met her in the courtyard,

for the alleged purpose of giving her a sum of money before she left—a sum large enough to make her independent for life.

This sum Geoffrey had failed to obtain, as his father was then alive. Excuses were of no avail; the girl furiously declared that Lord Halberton and all the world should know the horrible secret in the morning. Exasperated beyond control, Geoffrey struck her, and she fell stunned to the ground. The sight of her lying there insensible suggested an awful means of stopping her mouth for ever; and, drawing a hunting-knife he always carried, he cut her throat.

Under the courtyard ran a stream, which served as sewer to the castle; and, it having been choked up, a hole had been lately dug some twelve feet under the flags. This was only partially filled up, and the next day the job was to be completed. Into this he threw the body, removing the earth already thrown in, and then replacing it as before. The labourers' work was finished next day;

the maid, who had no friends among the servants, and whose enigmatical threats and vague airs of superiority had caused them to think her "odd," was supposed to have gone early in the morning, and there was no suspicion of the deed that had been done. But Geoffrey's mind, unhinged probably before, was unable to bear the strain of the constant terror of detection, and he became insane.

In his first outbreak he told all the dreadful story—luckily in the presence of his father alone. Lord Halberton, sending away all the servants, and taking care that no one but himself and two old retainers he could trust had access to the lunatic, made certain of the truth of the story by a search in the courtyard. It was given out, first, that Geoffrey Ellaby had gone a voyage to Australia, for his health, and then that he had died at sea. The necessary proofs were easily obtained; and it was arranged, as the safest plan, that the murderer should re-

main for the rest of his life in the dungeon of the castle where I had found him.

Lord Halberton never got over the shock these discoveries had given him, for his pride in the unstained name of his family was almost a craze. In a sealed letter he left after his death he told Frank—now supposed and supposing himself to be Lord Halberton—the horrible story, and bound him, by his love for his father and his duty to his family, to live at Ellaby, and to preserve the dread secret, the publication of which would drag the old name in the mire. And, not long before his death, he had extracted from Frank a solemn vow—which, poor fellow, he gave readily enough to the father he adored—to obey the instructions he would leave at his death.

"What was the crime?" I asked, when I heard Frank's recital.

He shivered.

"Never ask—it is too horrible! I *could* not put it into words."

"And so you must go on keeping him here, and taking him out every night, till he dies?"

"I must."

"Why not tell Kate?"

"I have promised to tell no one. The three men who know are devoted to us: my father had to tell them. You ought never to have known; but as you found out so much I thought it best you should know all."

"Poor Frank!"

"Poor Kate!" he sighed, wearily.

* * * * * *

I went back to my duty, and in a few months received the following laconic note:—

"DEAR CHARLIE,

"Ghost laid at last—for ever. Thank God! Come and stay with us.—Yours,

"FRANK."

I did go and stay. There was no more locking of the doors at night, no shrieks, no mystery, and the colour had come back again to my little sister's cheek.

OUR VIGILANCE COMMITTEE.

OUR VIGILANCE COMMITTEE.

I.

I HAD better call the Club of which I have the extreme happiness to be a member the *Pall Mall Club*. That is not its name, but it would perhaps be invidious were I to tell you exactly which of the palaces in that thoroughfare it is. Suffice it that it is second to none as to its wines, cookery, and members. We blackball pretty freely at the *Pall Mall*, and I do not think I am wrong in saying that it is about the most exclusive Club in London. At the head of our Committee is the Duke of Putney and

Dorset, K.G., and among the members are such names as Lord Middlemarch, "the poet of the dining-room," as some one called him, whose father, the eminent stock-broker, was created a Peer for Party reasons; Mr. Everard Chutney, the richest commoner in England, senior partner in the eminent firm of Chutney, Pickelham, and Co., who has twice won the Derby, and who married, as everyone knows, Lady Dora Dolittle, second daughter of the Duke of Sleeperton, such a sweet hostess, with such a cook! Then we had for another Committee-man Sir Villiers Howard Tomkins, M.P., the candid friend of the Ministry, lately given a baronetcy to moderate his candour, and who had totally eradicated all traces of the old soap-boiling establishment by a very serious and painstaking course of fashionable struggling. Sir Villiers was perhaps our most useful man; and it was, indeed, owing to his efforts that we, alone among the Clubs of London, used scented water in

our finger-glasses and tooth-picks engraved with the arms of the Club—a hand gloved (lavender) and beringed (diamonds and or) holding a ducal coronet.

One afternoon I strolled down to the *Pall Mall* as usual to see whether I could pick up some stray pieces of information for the amusement of my wife during our *tête-à-tête* dinner, and I found the morning-room in a state of excitement.

In the centre of a group in the bow-window was Sir Villiers Howard Tomkins with a newpaper in his hand.

"It is scandalous!" he was saying.

"Disgraceful!" said Lord Middlemarch, shaking his tangled locks.

"Something must be done!"

"Certainly, something must be done!"

"Oh, here's the Duke!" as the Duke of Putney and Dorset entered the room.

"Duke, have you seen this?"

"What? Eh? The new paper—the *Upper Ten?* No; what's in it?"

"I'll read the paragraph to you," said Sir Villiers, solemnly, and he proceeded to do so :—

"'No, my dear Duchess, even a person of your exalted rank, even one whose brother is a Marquis, and who is first cousin to two of the Cabinet; even a lady owning the largest pearls and the prettiest grey ponies in London, cannot quite defy the *convenances*. You have lived too soon, *ma petite Duchesse;* if you will bathe in the Thames in view of the vulgar public, are there no bathing dresses to be obtained? Oh, fie! Despite your lovely figure and marvellous 'headers,' you have made us blush.'"

"Ah!" said the Duke, when Sir Villiers put down the paper with an air of desperation. "Ah! very interesting; but whom does the fellow mean?"

There was rather an embarrassed pause for a moment; no one was prepared for so much ducal stupidity.

At last a sepulchral voice said—

"Who is first cousin to two members of the Cabinet?"

And then another voice, with increasing solemnity—

"And who is sister to a Marquis?"

Again a third voice—

"And who has the biggest pearls in London?"

"And the prettiest grey ponies?"

"God bless my soul!" cried the Duke, looking from one solemn face to another in dismay; "they mean my wife!"

II.

"SOMETHING *must* be done," again said Sir Villiers, pulling down his shirt-sleeves.

There was a general murmur of acquiescence.

"The man must be horsewhipped!"

"Kicked!"

"Prosecuted!"

"Indicted for libel at once!"

The Duke looked very uncomfortable, but said nothing. He had a small frame and a large stomach, and the first two suggestions were visibly inappropriate.

"It is time," said Sir Villiers, "that these abominable things are finally put a stop to. Such an outrageous insult on a lady whom we all have the honour of knowing, the wife of the President of our Committee, should be taken up and resented by the Club as a Club."

"With a Club," put in a wag; but no one laughed—the matter was too serious, and levity was felt to be out of place.

The Duke looked somewhat relieved; no personal action on his part seemed to be required.

"It is very wrong," he muttered, reading the peccant paragraph over again; "but it is just possible that we may be mistaken, that the man doesn't mean——"

"Is there another Duchess who drives

grey ponies and who has two cousins in the Cabinet?" asked Sir Villiers, severely. "No. The whole world knows who is meant, and the outrage must be dealt with at once. We must strike quick and strike hard, in the name of Society."

"*A la lanterne!*" cried a young member, who had been to the Paris Exhibition, which he called Exposition, for a week, and learned French during the period.

"I wonder whether the editor of the *Upper Ten* is a large man," murmured Lord Middlemarch, dreamily.

"Oh, anyone can thrash a d—d writing fellow," said the wag, who had sent many jokes to *Punch*, and felt just anger at their never having been inserted.

"I think we should keep within the law," said the Duke, hesitatingly.

"The law," enunciated Sir Villiers, in a tone which carried conviction, "never will protect the vermin who libel ladies and

gentlemen behind their backs. What I propose, gentlemen, is that we at once form a Vigilance Committee."

"Capital!"

"Just the thing!"

"Of course!"

"Yes—well—perhaps——" said the Duke. "But—excuse my asking—what is the nature and what will be the duties of a Vigilance Committee?"

"To protect Society from the slanderous attacks of anonymous writers in the Press."

"Ah!—but how?"

"By promptly resenting them. Would you permit this slander to pass unpunished?"

"Well," said the Duke, gently, "I think that perhaps the Duchess——"

"A woman cannot protect herself; it is for us to do so. We will take this insult as to each one of us, Duke."

"Oh, thank you," said the poor Duke, "but——"

"Yes, let us form a Committee at once, and it can then hold a meeting upstairs to concert measures. You will be the Chairman, Duke?"

"I? No, as it's a personal matter, I think I had better not."

"As you please," said Sir Villiers, with a touch of scorn. "Now, gentlemen, who will join the Committee?"

After some further conversation ten members were elected, of whom I was one, and we proceeded upstairs to concert measures; the result being that it was decided to take no hostile steps against the editor of the *Upper Ten* for this particular paragraph, but simply to order our newsagent to discontinue sending in that paper, and to request the Committees of other Clubs to do likewise. As most of them complied, the result was that members had to buy the paper for themselves—it being understood that the next libel was to be dealt with in some mysteriously awful manner—and the

circulation of the *Upper Ten* was very largely increased.

III.

THE *Upper Ten* came out on Thursday, and on that day in the next week the Vigilance Committee came together in a very excited state, each of us brandishing our six-penn'orth of scandal.

"Have you seen it?"

"Worse than ever!"

"Shameful!"

Sir Villiers came in last, and we noticed that he had discarded the neat umbrella with an onyx top which he usually carried, and instead held in his hand a strong cane with a piece of leather to go round the wrist. His face was solemn, and portentous of determination and fixity of purpose.

"You have seen this week's *Upper Ten?*" he asked. Eagerly we all held up our papers.

"Perhaps it would be best for me to read the paragraph we all of us are thinking of:—

"'You have very pretty ankles, dear Duchess, and, as we told you last week, your figure is as exquisite as your pearls and your ponies; but surely the *débardeuse* costume is scarcely *en règle*, even to play lawn-tennis in, when you are alone amongst a party of young men at your pretty Maidenhead villa! And, Duchess, what is this we hear of a statue of your Grace, life-size, as Venus rising from the sea—strictly *classical*—and the sculptor is young, is he not? What is the poor dear Duke thinking of? You are young and pretty—we own it—but a line must be drawn *somewhere*.'"

There was a dead silence as Sir Villiers finished his reading. The Vigilance Committee felt its responsibility had commenced in earnest.

"I presume there can be no doubt in any of our minds as to who is meant. The

villa at Maidenhead—the pearls—the ponies —all point to the Duchess of Putney."

"The Duchess of Putney *and Dorset*," put in a member, who was a stickler for correctness.

"The Duchess of Putney and Dorset, of course," said Sir Villiers, frowning. "The time for action has arrived, gentlemen."

We all assented, and waited to hear what form the action was to take.

To recount all our discussion would be tedious. Suffice it that at last we named a deputation of three who were to wait upon the editor of the *Upper Ten*, and require the name of the author of this abominable paragraph. I was of the three.

Arrived at the office, we were, after some delay, shown into a room at the far end of which, seated at a table which was between him and us, was an individual with a hook nose, dark whiskers, and a profusion of jewellery.

"Be seated, gentlemen," he said, pointing

with his pen to some chairs near the wall. Then, observing that we hesitated, "Pray be seated. I cannot transact business with persons standing up, and it's a peculiarity of my dog"—here we observed that an enormous bull-dog was lying on the hearth-rug "to fly at people moving about in a room. He is very quiet out of doors, but in a room I cannot always answer for him. Might I ask you not to shuffle your legs about, as it annoys him?—and I am sorry to say he is in so bad a temper this morning that I cannot quite answer for him."

"Had you not better send the brute out of the room?" said Sir Villiers, looking pale and determined.

"I fear he would not obey me—and I would prefer not to disturb him. There will be no danger if you sit still and do not raise your voices too much. I could scarcely keep him off anyone who became excited or moved suddenly."

"Really, sir," I said, with some petulance,

for I detest dogs—especially bull-dogs—"it is too absurd that——"

"Hush, *please!*" said the editor, looking anxiously at the brute. "Do not speak excitedly, I entreat. I see Bob has his eye on you."

He had—he certainly had his eye upon me. The deputation of the Vigilance Committee of the *Pall Mall Club* sat very still on their three chairs, and even Sir Villiers seemed for the moment to forget that his shirt-cuffs were not visible.

"Well, gentlemen, your business, *if* you please?" said the editor, politely. "My time is valuable."

"We come, sir, on behalf of——" began Sir Villiers.

"Please speak gently, sir—quite gently —thank you."

"We come," went on our chairman, in a dulcet whisper, "on behalf of a Vigilance Committee, formed at the *Pall Mall Club*, for the protection of ladies and gentlemen

in Society from libels in the Press, to demand the name of the author of a certain paragraph in your paper which unmistakably points to a lady who is the wife of one of our members, and alludes to her in terms of the grossest kind."

This would have been impressive delivered in Sir Villiers' usual peremptory tones, but spoken as if it were a tender inquiry after the editor's health, or a friendly invitation to dinner, it somehow missed its effect.

"Thank you, you have not disturbed Bob," said the editor, courteously. "And what is the name of the lady who considers herself aggrieved ?"

Bob yawned, and we involuntarily looked at the huge teeth the action revealed.

"We consider ourselves—we consider Society—aggrieved by the insult to a leading member of it, and we come to you in the name of Society," said Sir Villiers, in a very low tone.

" Ah, in the name of Society !" repeated

the editor, picking his teeth; "indeed!"

"Yes, sir," cried Sir Villiers, putting back one arm for the purpose of pulling down his sleeve, but pausing in the act as he met Bob's glassy eye. "Yes, sir," he went on, very gently; "and to demand the name of the writer of the paragraph."

"I'm afraid I can't manage that."

"You refuse! Then let me tell you—"

"Take care, sir—for Heaven's sake take care! If you raise your voice I cannot answer for the consequences, and—excuse me—but I should not like an accident to happen here. Will that gentleman be good enough not to swing his leg about?"

I planted my feet firmly on the floor, noticing as I did so that Bob was watching them as a cat does a mouse.

"I advise you to think twice before sending us back to the Committee with such an insolent answer," said Sir Villiers, almost in a whisper.

"It don't require any thought," said the editor, lighting a cigarette. "It is not our practice to give up the names of our contributors unless they wish it. I will communicate with the person who wrote the paragraph of which you complain, and possibly the name may be given you, although it will be against my advice if it is. In the meantime, you have your remedy at law; you, or rather this lady's husband, can take any action you please. As I observed before, my time is valuable—good morning, gentlemen. I am very pleased to have made the acquaintance of such zealous and courageous champions of Society. *Please* be careful to rise quietly—thanks—and don't put on your hats till you are outside the door. Bob is the champion of good manners, just as you are the champions of Society. *Good* morning."

When we rose Bob had also risen, and perhaps it was owing to this fact that Sir Vil-

liers made no reply to the wicked insolence of the scoundrel editor.

I had no idea our chairman was so heavy till he stood on my corn as we jostled through the door together; but Bob was advancing, and I thought it impolite to cry out.

We were all very silent as we drove back to the Club.

"Energetic measures must be taken," said Sir Villiers, firmly, as we got out of my T cart.

"Certainly," we rejoined.

"Even if I horsewhip that insolent snob myself."

"Most decidedly," we again replied.

"Perhaps we had better not report to the Committee at present. It is of no use doing so in the middle of the negotiation," he remarked, at the top of the steps. In this we most cordially agreed; and, having arranged for a meeting on the morrow, we separated, with mixed feelings as to the

pleasure and dignity of belonging to a Vigilance Committee for the Defence of Society.

IV.

It is rather a curious coincidence that I did not happen to know the lady in whose behalf I was enlisted. She was such a very great person and so generally known that I had got into the habit of thinking that I was personally acquainted with her, while in reality I blush to say that I did not even know her by sight, although there were one or two ladies among whom lay the choice in my mind; but I was ashamed to ask anyone, for such ignorance would have been too humiliating.

No knight of old days, however, could have buckled on his armour to do battle for his lady with more zeal than I braced myself for the conflict to avenge the Duchess's wrongs, for was I not one of her order, my

great-grandfather having been first cousin to a peer? And does not *noblesse oblige?*

So when I received a hasty note from Sir Villiers, two days after our visit to the editor with the bull-dog, saying that a letter had been received by him to the effect that the author of the dreadful paragraph was willing to meet one member of our Committee at the office of the paper, and that I had been selected as the emissary, I tried to forget all about Bob's tremendous fangs, and drove valiantly down to the Strand.

I took with me a good strong cane, and—let me confess it—I also took inside me a good strong glass of the old Club brandy.

Visions of hand-to-hand encounters, of one heroic gentleman struggling alone against editors, contributors, sub-editors, printers, and printers' devils, with one calf firmly held between the teeth of a bull-dog—visions of trials for assault and battery—of hard labour—of enormous fines—of duels and hair-triggers—but also of much praise and

honour in the drawing-rooms of Society and morning-rooms of Clubs—flitted through my brain as I entered the outer office of the *Upper Ten*, and sent a note, previously written at the Club, to the editor. I was shown into a small room upstairs; it was empty. Were the contributors, as well as the editor, also accompanied by bull-dogs with irritable nerves? I wondered. The handle of the door turned—I drew myself up to the full height—I grasped my cane firmly in the right hand, while the left I prepared as a shield and buckler against the blows of the coming enemy—the door opened—and there entered the prettiest small lady imaginable, plainly dressed in black, with great laughing blue eyes and curly auburn hair. She made me a demure little curtsey, and, taking a seat, she motioned to me also to be seated.

"You do not know me?" she asked, looking, I thought, at me in some surprise.

Evidently some well-known authoress.

"No, Madam," I stammered; "although I daresay I know you well by your works."

"Well, sir," she went on, with fun dancing in those wonderful eyes, "so you have come to horsewhip me. *I* wrote the paragraph about the Duchess of Putney—and I meant her. Now then!"

She crossed her arms with a little air of defiance that was quite enchanting. Horsewhip her! I longed to fall down and worship her. If there were many contributors of this kind, I would myself start a "Society Paper" at once.

"You really shouldn't have written it, for you know it is not true, and—and—it has hurt the Duchess's feelings."

"Oh, has it?" she said, dryly.

"Of course you don't know the Duchess?" I asked.

"Well, no, not exactly. Do you?"

"Yes, Madam," I replied, and, indeed, I felt, as I have explained, as if I did know that lady.

"Oh, and she is hurt, is she?"

"Terribly; as are also her friends."

"But supposing the paragraph told the truth?"

"The greater the truth the greater the libel," I said, with a dim recollection of some legal axiom of the sort, which, by the way, sounds very silly when you think it over. "And, besides, Madam, if it were possible, which of course it is not, for such things to be done by persons in Society, they are not to be put in print for the amusement of all the shopboys who choose to buy the *Upper Ten*. They are not," I cried, warming into eloquence, and a little stung by the expression of amusement on her lovely face, "to be made the subject of coarse jest and inuendo in the street and the tavern, in the servants'-hall and the pantry." "The pantry" was weak—I felt it was weak—but I could think of no other place at the moment. "Coal-barge" came into my head, but I had my doubts as to whether bargees

did take in sixpenny "Journals of Society."

"Why not?" said the contributor.

"Why not, Madam! Can you ask me? Because there is a delicacy, a refinement, which, although it may sometimes overstep the boundary of strict decorum, will always —among the upper classes—shrink from the vulgarity of the public gaze." This was good—very good; but still I saw her covert smile—which became her rosebud mouth wonderfully, by-the-by—and I began to wonder what would be the upshot of it all. I saw that I could gain nothing better than an apology, and, looking at her face, I scarcely thought I had much chance of even that.

"You are behind the age, my dear sir," she said, taking a little cigarette out of a dainty silver case. "Publicity is part of the thing now. We all revel in a glass-house existence, and rather enjoy the game of stone-throwing. The crash of the glass is music in our ears. Have you a light?"

I lit her cigarette for her. What a lovely little hand she had, and how deliciously she sent her first puff of smoke into my face and nearly blinded me, and laughed, such a sweet ringing laugh! I laughed too as I rubbed my eyes, and thought of Sir Villiers sitting at the Club, pouring out strings of anathemas against the reptile libellist. She a reptile! She was—but I must proceed with my true narrative.

"Well, sir, what do you propose to do? Why don't you horsewhip me? I should rather like it. I came in to be horsewhipped, you know."

"Ladies cannot be punished in that way. There *is* a way, though," I said, looking as arch as ever I could.

"And what is that?" she asked, leaning back in her chair and revealing the daintiest of little feet and high-heeled boots.

I hesitated. Bah! She was one of the contributors to a low newspaper.

"The ordeal by kissing——" I began.

"Sir!"

I was electrified. Her tone was that of an offended queen—but there was a twinkle in her eye too.

"If people choose to behave——" I began.

"Don't be foolish, sir; and stick to your business. Is the Duke—the Duke of Putney—one of your precious Vigilance Committee?"

"No; he——"

"Who is the head of it? Are you?"

"Sir Villiers Howard-Tomkyns, Member for Snobborough, is our chairman, and Lord Middlemarch——"

"Old March Hare!" and she burst out laughing. "Who else?"

I was offended by her levity. But what could I say to so lovely and fragile a little creature?

"Mr. Chutney, of Chutney."

"Pompous Chut, too! Oh, dear! This is very funny," she went on, her manner

becoming suddenly serious. "The great position and social importance of your Committee induce me to make a great concession. Your vigilance shall have its reward. I will consent to go and see the Duchess and apologise in person to her, and, if you and the gentlemen you have named will come to Putney House to-morrow at twelve o'clock, I will meet you there, and you shall introduce me to them, and hear me also apologise to them, if they then require it."

"They will require a very ample apology."

"They shall have it, if they want it."

"But I am not sure that the Duchess will consent to receive you."

"I will take my chance of that. She can scarcely refuse to allow me to express my contrition for having hurt her Grace's feelings, or also to apologise, through your Committee, to outraged society for my offence. Sit down and write a note to her at once—here are paper and pens—men-

tioning that the other gentlemen will arrive at twelve."

She had an imperious manner which no one could have resisted, and I sat down and wrote. Would Sir Villiers or any of the others have succeeded as I had done?

I doubted it. Perhaps my manner with women *was* rather good.

The letter was sealed and directed, and I took my leave, pressing her delicate fingers as I did so, and looking forward to the morrow, when I should see her saucy *riante* face again.

If I told you that I had fallen in love at first sight with this wicked little scandalous writer, you might not believe me, but it was a fact for all that.

V.

EVEN the Member for Snobborough could not—although he seldom approved of anything not done by himself—refrain from

some slight praise of my tact when I related to him the particulars and result of my interview.

"Ladylike you say she was, eh? Pretty, I daresay, in a dairymaid, vulgar style; but ladylike! No, my dear fellow, you must permit me to doubt *that*, for you are so easily imposed upon, you know, and there is a *je ne sais quoi* about a lady which it requires peculiar qualities quite to appreciate. Having such a person in her house will be very disagreeable to the Duchess, of course; but, if she agrees, we can only make the interview as short as possible. Twelve o'clock, eh?"

At twelve o'clock punctually next day we were, all ten of us, at Putney House, and were shown into the dining-room, where we found the Duke, looking rather annoyed, I thought, as well he might be.

"It's the most foolish business," he said.

"Really, Duke!" said our chairman, rather huffily, "I cannot see that. This

atrocious woman shall hear from me—in the presence of the lady she has insulted—some home-truths; and who knows but that our prompt action in this matter may not have effect on the rest of the brood of vipers?"

The Duke shrugged his shoulders. I fancied I discerned a smile at the corners of his mouth.

A servant entered and asked me to follow him. In a small room in the same passage, whither he showed me, I found my pretty little writer, looking prettier than ever. It was all I could do to prevent myself falling at her feet then and there.

"You mustn't be nervous. The Duchess is very good-natured," I said, holding her hand as long as I could.

"Oh, is she? I'll try not to be nervous."

"You'd better have accepted the penalty I proposed," I whispered in her ear.

"I think we will go into the drawing-

room," she remarked, gently withdrawing her hand from mine.

"One thing remember," I said, hurriedly, as she moved towards the door. "I acquit you of all blame in this matter, and—and will you allow our acquaintance to continue —may I call on you—will you give me your address?"

"You will know it directly," she said, as I followed her into the passage.

"Go in first and tell them who is with you," she whispered, and, entering the drawing-room, I said—

"Gentlemen, allow me to present to you the lady who acknowledges to having written the paragraph in the *Upper Ten* which we were obliged to resent, and who is anxious to apologise to you for the same."

I caught sight of the Duke's face as I spoke, and was puzzled at the intense amusement depicted on it. I turned round, and the wicked little woman entered.

Sir Villiers turned ashy white, Lord

Middlemarch started up with an ejaculation, and Mr. Chutney exclaimed, in accents of surprise I can hear now, "The Duchess!"

VI.

"YES, gentlemen," she said, coming forward, and standing by the Duke, and placing her little hand within his arm, "I wrote the paragraph which you wished to resent in the name of Society. I had heard tell of the deeds you were going to do, and I wished to test your zeal for that Society which you adorn. Might I recommend you in future to do two things?—to mind your own business, and—not to be afraid of bulldogs. And you, sir,"—here she turned to me with a smile—"you really mustn't make love at first sight to writers for the Press, or they might put in paragraphs which your wife could understand. And, now that Society is avenged—shall we go in to luncheon?"

JOHN:

A COWES IDYL.

JOHN.

I.

MANY people have forgotten, for at the pace we live now even the most interesting scandal can scarcely claim its legitimate nine days of wonder—many people, I say, have probably forgotten the little excitement at Cowes last year, when Lady Peckover did something which caused such anguish to the soul of Sir Henry, her husband, as to force him to take refuge in the Court of Bankruptcy, while the lady retired to the temporary seclusion of her parents' country home. The Peckovers have come

together again since then, and, some mysterious improvements in their pecuniary affairs having taken place, give charming little dinners in Park Lane. If Lord Goldbury is very often there, it is no affair of ours, and, as long as we are invited to partake of their banquets, what does it matter to us who pays for them? I, for one, detest the carping spirit that insists on looking every gift horse in the mouth, and which cannot allow a pretty woman to wear pretty clothes, ride a pretty horse, live in a pretty house, and spend a pretty penny, without inquiring into the state of her husband's banking account. Such pettiness is beneath the tolerance of our nineteenth century. I myself had quite forgotten all about the Peckover incident of last year, although at the time its mystery had rather piqued my curiosity, and should probably have never thought of it again had not my steps turned last winter to an unfrequented village in the south of Italy, where I went to contemplate Nature

for a space, undisturbed by the cackle of English and American tourists.

It was about twelve miles from a railway station, and the inn was small and poor; so that I heard with some surprise at the small *table-d'hôte* the familiar accents of the Anglo-Italian tongue, and, turning round, was still more surprised to see, partially disguised by a new beard, no less a person than John Harding, of Harding, the young millionaire who had burst upon London a couple of seasons before, and who had disappeared entirely from view at the very time of the Cowes excitement concerning the Peckovers.

As I warmly greeted him, and remembered that at first his name had been mixed up with that of her sprightly little ladyship, but that, when she was known to have retired alone to the innocent quiet of her parents' house, it became apparent that we had falsely suspected the shy John Harding of Don Juanism, I remembered, however,

that when I had imparted my first suspicion to Alan de Beandesse (the Duke of Beefanham's second son), that smart young gentleman, a great friend of the Peckovers, had looked so mysteriously knowing, and been withal so uncommunicative, that I had longed to kick him, and that he had not seemed afterwards entirely to agree with me in acquitting Harding of all share in the Peckover quarrel.

"What on earth are you doing here?" I asked, as we proceeded to tackle the doubtful *table d'hôte* food.

John replied, looking rather sheepish,

"Oh! I don't know. Nice quiet place; out of the way."

"Quiet enough, in all conscience, and out of the way. But you don't mean to say you have been staying here long?"

"Only three months."

"*Only* three months! Why, my dear fellow," I began, for the idea of a man stay-

ing three months in such a place filled me with horror.

"I had a reason for wishing to be out of the way, which, perhaps—— By-the-by, where are the Peckovers now?"

He asked the question suddenly, keeping his eyes on the table, and I thought I saw a blush come upon his cheek.

"The Peckovers! Oh! I believe they have made up their quarrel, whatever it was, and are living together again. It was mysterious, that row, wasn't it?"

"Did no one, I mean has no one, any idea what it was all about?"

There was deep agitation in his voice, and the prospect of clearing up a mystery cheered me, and enabled me to face the so-called beef now presented to us with greater chance of mastication.

"No. There was a notion once that you——"

He groaned; and an Italian bagman

opposite, who thought his feelings were hurt by the toughness of the meat, groaned from sympathy.

"Don't, my dear fellow! For God's sake don't!"

"Why? Is it a sore subject?" I asked.

"Sore! It is perfectly appalling! So you say they have come together again?"

"Yes."

He gave a sigh of relief, and changed the subject, his spirits visibly raised by my intelligence.

After dinner I went to the expense of ordering a bottle of champagne, which, sweet as it was, led to another; and, when we adjourned to the pretty garden to smoke, John Harding was in that comfortable, communicative state which only needs the addition of a good cigar to make a man do a kindness or let out a secret. I gave him a good cigar. And this shows the strength of my desire for information. I, a traveller in Italy—the land of prohibitive tobacco

duties and Cavour weeds—gave him a shilling cigar from my London tobacconist's!

We got on the subject of women before long, as men so often do after a bottle or two of wine (the next stage is theology).

"They are queer creatures," enunciated my friend, gazing at the moon, and making rings with his smoke.

"They are, indeed," I assented.

"*Awful* creatures," he repeated, with emphasis.

"Awful," again I echoed.

"By Gad, sir!" and he raised himself in his chair and looked in my face, "they will do anything, will women—anything!"

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes! Always. There is no fear, no hesitation—look here—it's been on my mind for a long while, and I feel that I could bear it better if I told some one. I am exiled by a woman!"

"By Jove!"—I was getting near the secret now.

"Yes—positively exiled by one. But I daresay the story would bore you?"

"No, not at all. Indeed, I should rather like to hear it."

"Well, you remember that fuss at Cowes last autumn? You were talking about them just now."

"The Peckovers? Yes."

"It's a horrible story," he said, shuddering; "but I think I'll tell you. Perhaps if they have come together again I may. At any rate, I'll tell you all about it, and I shall expect your sympathy."

"You shall have it, old fellow," I rejoined, pressing his hand. "Go ahead."

II.

"The first thing I saw in London when I first came up from Oxford was Lady Peckover's face," he began, "and after that I saw nothing else. It was as if I had looked into the sun and was dazzled. She was

everywhere. She seemed, so to speak, to pervade my whole existence. Of course I fought against it as much as possible, for I never forgot that she was a married woman, and I never was one of your unprincipled fellows, you know. At any rate, I determined to worship her at a distance, and never let her know what I felt. She seemed so good and pure that I knew—or thought I knew—my sentiments would have shocked her terribly; and, besides, I never would have done so wrong a thing by a friend (and I made great friends with Sir Henry) as to make love to his wife. I must have managed my concealment very well, too, for it was extraordinary how often he asked me to dinner, and was always making little plans by which I found myself alone with her. Often, even when I called—against my wish, but my legs *would* carry me to their house—and he happened to be at home, he would go out, leaving me to sit like a fool, scarcely daring to look at her

lovely face, and too afraid of myself to dare to speak. And I couldn't go away. Oh! the hours I have spent sitting in a chair in that little dining-room, with my hat beside me, not saying a word; but listening to her rippling talk, and now and again just glancing at her bright eyes! By Jove! how bright they were! She was so popular that I often wondered no one else called when I was there. And I often fancied I heard rings and knocks at the door. But certainly, I scarcely ever was disturbed.

"Sir Henry's confidence in me was wonderful, and amply repaid me the little assistance I was enabled sometimes to give him; for you know he was not quite as well off as he might have been."

"Yes, I know," I replied, wondering at the innocence beside me.

"Well," went on John Harding, "as the season went on I grew more and more infatuated; but I kept a strict watch on myself, and though I will own to you, my dear

fellow, that the opportunities Sir Henry gave me in the house I took for Ascot, and again at Bognor, where I got a place for Goodwood, and again at Cowes, when they came on board my yacht, and afterwards in Scotland, when they came to my place, were ample, I came through with flying colours, and never said a thing (whatever I may have thought) that could cause me to hesitate to take the man's hand and look him in the face.

"I thought sometimes that he did not much care for his wife, and certainly they had some quarrels which appeared to me to be rather more bitter than necessary. And of course I knew that he was a great deal with that actress; but because he behaved ill that was no reason I should do so. I was determined to keep my love (I always called her that to myself of course) on the pedestal where I had placed her; and I give you my word that I never did more than on one occasion press my lips upon her

hand. Then we got through the next season, during which the differences between the Peckovers got worse and worse, and I fear the pecuniary difficulties increased in the same ratio, for Lady P. was an extravagant little woman, and æsthetic; at least she said she was æsthetic, and then—and then we went to Cowes for the second time."

He shuddered slightly as he came to this point in his recital and paused. When we had ordered cognac, "fine champagne," and a syphon, he took in some Dutch courage, and resumed—

"I had given up my yacht then, for I was always sea-sick if we went outside the Solent, and it's no use paying through the nose and mouth for a thing you hate—and determined to enjoy myself looking at the yachts from the shore. The Peckovers came to the same hotel as myself; but things were not quite comfortable between us. Sir Henry had been losing a great deal all the racing season, and, though not, I hope, a stingy

fellow, I had thought it necessaay to draw the line somewhere, and had—it was just before we left town—absolutely refused to lend him any more. What between him and his wife I had spent—but it's no use going into that now. He seemed very angry for a moment, but checked himself, and was quite friendly when we met at the Castle at Cowes, more friendly than ever, I thought. So was she. Never had I had such a struggle with my inclination as I had that first week at the sea. I was never away from her side for a moment; or, if I was, her eyes, in which there was something inexpressibly melancholy and touching, immediately recalled me. Of course I knew people were talking—had been talking of us for some time; but as long as I had a clear conscience I did not care, especially as, when I had once hinted something of this to her, she had laughed and declared she did not mind what they said.

"'You know, John, it is all untrue,' she

said, sighing, and transfixing me with her gaze.

"'Yes, Lady Peckover,' I answered.

"'You never call me Nelly; even people I don't care about call me Nelly,' she said again, with another sigh.

"I explained to her that it was better not; that, whatever others might do, I, at least, was never going to overstep the boundary of deep respect, mingled with devotion of the purest kind. And, as I said this, I raised one of her white hands to my lips.

"Looking up afterwards, I certainly imagined I saw an angry expression on her face; but it probably was only fancy. Her face was as changeable as an April day, but always beautiful. Even when she scolded her maid—as she had done pretty sharply before me once or twice—and her eyes flashed, and her little foot stamped upon the ground, she was perfectly enchanting; and I envied her maid, who touched her

hair—such hair as it is!—without any qualm of conscience.

"We had a common sitting-room at the hotel, Alan de Beandesse making up the party. Alan had become a great friend of mine, and was always talking of Lady Peckover, whom he called Nelly; and, in a wrapped up way, urging me to—well, to do what would have been wrong; but Alan had no more principle than a cow. No De Beandesse ever had, I believe, from the days of William the Conqueror (when the representative of the family had the privilege of presenting the monarch with his morning draught) until now.

"This is a capital cigar, but it's done. You haven't another, have you? Mine have been gone a long time, and those here are unsmokeable."

It was a high price to pay even for the interesting *dénouement* of his tale; but I gave him another, and, puffingly, he proceeded.

III.

"ALAN had, as you know, one of those beastly white boats—Una boats, they are sometimes called—with a box in the middle for a keel or something; an arrangement I have never understood, for I always thought the keel was at the bottom of a vessel; it certainly was in my yacht.

"The little ruses I practised to avoid sailing in this detestable machine were numerous; but Lady Peckover had set her heart on it, and of course she had her way in the end. So one morning—a fresh breeze blowing 'off the land,' as Alan said, 'just the thing to take us over to Southampton to lunch'—we sallied forth, armed with opera-glasses and rugs innumerable, and found the instrument of torture at the landing-steps, with Alan, superbly attired in blue serge, awaiting us.

"The boat looked so very small and insignificant that I couldn't help asking whether it was safe, as there was a good

deal of wind, which appeared to be rising.

"'Safe as a church—jump in—now, Lady Peckover—that's it—sit down there: in the well, like Truth. The True is the Beautiful, you know. Isn't that what you High Art people say? Now, John, in you get; we don't want the keel down, as it's a dead run across;—why, where's the Baronet?'

"'Oh, he always forgets something,' said his wife. 'He's left his glasses at home or something.'

"'Well, we'll just get her away from these steps, as she's bumping her paint off. Catch hold of the tiller, John, for a moment. I want to get the jib up.'

"'But I can't steer,' I cried.

"'Never mind, put it up, to your left—that's right; we can come back to pick up Sir Henry.' As he spoke, a gust came and laid the boat over on her side, but she righted again at once. 'That's because the keel ain't down; but we shan't want it when

we're once off,' said Alan, with a heartless laugh—heartless because he might have seen the agony depicted on my face. How I regretted that Lady Peckover was so largely endowed with courage! but she showed no sign of wishing to back out of our dangerous enterprise.

"'Have you left your keel at home?' I asked, snappishly.

"'At home! No,' he said, laughing; 'but, by Jove! I have left something at home—the key of the locker. We'll just go in to the pier. That's it! Now catch hold of the tiller and keep her up in the wind till I'm back—won't be a minute.'

"He brought the boat up close to the steps as he spoke, and jumped out. The action of his foot sent the boat's stern out; something happened—I don't know what—but before I could do anything to prevent it the mainsail flew out—the cord or sheet, or whatever stupid name sailors may give it, having been improperly secured, and, to my

horror and agony, we were flying away from the shore at a terrific pace.

"'Bring her up! Put your helm down!' shouted Alan, from the shore.

"I pushed the tiller one way, and in a moment we were lying on our side; so I pulled it back again, or we should have upset.

"'Let down the keel!' yelled Alan.

"Let down the keel! How was I to do so? I didn't even know where the keel was, nor where it was to be let down to. I frantically undid a rope, and a little stick —a topmast, I think it is called—came down like a rocket stick, and went close by Lady Peckover's head.

"The wind howled in my ears; surely it was blowing a hurricane! and madly I pushed the dreadful tiller *away* from me; again we lay over on our side, and the water covered the deck until I pulled it back again; and then again we flew before the wind, escaping collision with the anchored

yachts by a succession of miracles. Despair seized upon me. I looked back on the receding shore; I saw Alan gesticulating wildly, I saw Sir Henry join him, and seem to be expostulating angrily with him; then the latter dashed down the steps, and jumped into a boat that was lying there, which immediately shoved off. But pursuit was useless—we were literally flying—and in a few minutes the Baronet stood up and —could I believe my eyes?—shook his fist in fury at us. I turned to my companion with a frenzy of despair, and my eyes met hers. She put her hand in mine, which still grasped the cursed tiller, and said, in a low, thrilling tone I shall never forget—

"'Oh! John, why have you done this? You have ruined me!'

IV.

"CAN anyone imagine a more fearful position?" went on John Harding, with emo-

tion, "alone with the lady in a boat, the management of which I did not in the least understand, with the wind howling and the open sea before us, and with the husband—perhaps naturally misunderstanding the situation—howling behind us. 'You have ruined me!' What did she mean? Did she also believe that I had done it on purpose—that my ignorance of the accursed boat, or of the use of the tiller and the main-sheet was assumed? I could scarcely believe it. Yet when, her hand still being on mine, I glanced at her face, I read nothing but fear and soft reproach there.

"'*I* ruined you!' I gasped, clutching the tiller, and making the boat lie over on its side by another attempt to turn her round. '*I*?'

"'Oh, John!' she cried, putting both her hands on mine, 'do turn before it is too late. Perhaps even now he would forgive me—I am weak—foolish, but—— Yes, John, let us turn back even now.'

"Turn back! Oh, that only I could! But on we flew, and no efforts of mine could stay us. I tried to remember what I had seen done to the keel, but it was an enigma to me.

"'Can't you undo it?' I cried, petulantly.

"'Would that we could undo it!—perhaps it is not too late,' she murmured, pensively, bowing her head down upon her hands.

"'No—I mean the keel——'

"'Ah! I was not talking of keels, John,' she said, in accents of reproach.

"'But, good heavens, Lady Peckover!——'

"'At *such* a moment—Lady Peckover! You might call me Nelly *now*.'

"'Well, Nelly—or whatever you please—don't you see that we are helpless—that I can't do anything with the beastly boat—that we shall be carried out to sea and drowned unless we are picked up by some steamer?'

"That thought gave me some comfort,

and I eagerly scanned the water in search of some vessel that could save us.

"'And then where shall we go, John?'

"'Where? Why, back again.'

"'No, no!' she cried, sitting up and looking me full in the face. 'Back? Never! Do you think I could face him? Do you think I could let you incur such danger for my sake, John?'

"At any other time the tenderness in her voice and eyes would have thrilled me; now, however, I was too agitated and alarmed to be impressed by it.

"'There is no danger in returning,' I said. 'Sir Henry could never suppose——'

"'Sir Henry! Did you see his expression as we sailed away? Sir Henry does suppose the worst. It is done, John—done, irrevocably done.'

"It seemed like a hideous dream. There we were, flying away from land, from hope, with unknown danger on every side;

and by my side the woman talked calmly of our having done a thing against which my whole moral nature rebels.

"'*Can* we not let down the keel?' I exclaimed, helplessly.

"'Where is it?' she inquired, indifferently, looking up at the mast, to which, indeed, I believed it to be in some mysterious manner fastened.

"On! on! we went! The wind changing a little, we were obliged to keep to the right of Portsmouth—to the right of the forts. In vain I waved my handkerchief and shouted as we passed the second of these. The artillerymen lounging about thought it was only a demonstration of joy, and shouted back again. On! on! The hand that held the tiller grew numb; I felt a singing in my ears. Lady Peckover remained in the same situation of half-remorseful affection. It was maddening!

"I looked round. Good Heavens! We were leaving the island fast now, and there

was nothing but open sea before us. There were yachts about us; but I did not know what were the orthodox signals of distress, and the people on board them only grinned and waved their handkerchiefs back again in answer to my frantic demonstrations.

"On! on! I don't know how many hours I had sat there in stony despair, when I became aware that Lady Peckover had risen and was searching about for something.

"'I am hungry, John,' she said.

"Hungry! That she could be hungry under such circumstances!

"'I suppose you brought something? Where are we going to, John?'

"At any other time the way she nestled to my side would have filled me with delight. Not now.

"'Going to?' I replied, gloomily. 'Going to be drowned, I think.'

"'Oh, I hope not! You manage the boat so beautifully. Let me see, France

will be the first land if we keep on as we are. Perhaps you are right, dear. France will be best. But *have* you brought anything to eat?'

"Under the seat she found a Strasbourg pie and a bottle of champagne; and, to my extreme wonderment, proceeded in the most business-like manner to discuss these delicacies.

"'Do have some, John, you will want keeping up; we have much before us, you know.'

"Before us! Yes, there was the open sea, death by drowning, death by starving, death from thirst; and, besides, there was that other horror which she had hinted at, but which I steadily refused to entertain. The wind did not seem to have at all abated. An occasional wave curled close up behind us, and seemed about to swallow us up. Every time I tried to bring the boat round she simply lay down on her side, and I was only too thankful to put

her before the wind again. Fearful as this involuntary flight was, it seemed in some degree better than being drowned at once.

"'Don't be so melancholy, John. You are all I have now, you know.'

"'All you have?' I stammered. 'Why, this little accident, if we can get anywhere, will easily be explained to Sir Henry, and ——'

"'Oh, you don't know Sir Henry,' she said, opening her big eyes to their full extent, and laying her head on my shoulder. 'He is perfectly fearful when jealous, and now—what is the good of disguising it?—we *have* run away, John, you know.'

"'The boat has run away, you mean.'

"'Do you think he will ever believe that? Do you think anyone will ever believe it? No, no, John! It is done. I am ruined—and for you.'

"She looked up into my face as she said

this, with her lips not six inches from mine, and had not a bigger wave than usual come curling right upon us, as it seemed, I don't know what might have happened.

"'He has suspected us for some time,' she went on, when the wave had been surmounted; 'and I have daily been expecting an explosion.'

"I thought of the way in which he had left us together—of Ascot, of Goodwood, of Scotland, of our common sitting-room at the hotel at Cowes—but who in such a position as mine could argue the point?

"'I do trust you won't fight, John! No one fights about these things now-a-days, and Sir Henry can't be so unreasonable. Where shall we live till—I mean, at first?'

"I was exasperated, as well I might be.

"'Look here, Nelly, this is all nonsense. You know as well as I do that this is the merest accident. If we ever get safely to shore it will, of course, be explained, and——'

"'No, John, no! Don't deceive yourself. *I* at least am ruined, but perhaps you will desert me—perhaps, having taken from me my home, my character, my husband, everything—you will leave me to starve upon a foreign shore!' And she burst into tears, with her head upon my shoulder.

"What could I do but console her? What could anyone else in my place have done? It was a situation absolutely unique. I defy you or anyone to produce a fellow to it. Well—I put one arm round her waist, grasping the tiller with my right hand, and soon she went to sleep, and I got the cramp in my arm; and the night came on, and the stars came out and seemed to be looking down upon me with derision; I thought I discovered a grin even in the face of the moon; and still on—on went the accursed boat, with its load of very innocent crime.

"I don't think I ever thought so much as I did through that long night; and I will

confess to you that as I found the waves did not engulph us, and the wind did not grow stronger, I began to feel a slightly satisfactory heroic glow. Alone on the broad ocean with a lovely woman confiding herself to me with such sweet candour; all—our safety, our future—depending on me alone; with an angry husband in the distance, and a vision of pistols and manslaughter in the future—yes; there was no doubt about it—I *was* a hero! There was something rather fine, too, I couldn't help thinking, in an elopement by Una-boat—unusual, unhackneyed, romantic. So, giving myself up to such thoughts, I had nearly fallen asleep when a peculiar noise roused me, and, looking up, I found we were close to a large steamer, which was indeed rapidly catching us up.

"Quietly removing my arm from its imprisonment by Lady Peckover, I, impelled by a happy thought, undid every rope I could see, and, as I had hoped, down came

our sail. I should have done this before but that the incident of the top-mast falling had alarmed me as to the possible consequences. Now, however, with assistance close at hand, I determined to venture it, and with complete success. Then, standing up, I shouted at the top of my voice for help.

"The steamer slackened her speed, then stopped.

"'What do you want?' hailed a man on the bridge.

"'To be taken on board!' I shouted in return.

"'Oh, John,' said Lady Peckover in my ear, 'is this wise? Suppose Sir Henry is on board?'

"'All right?' hailed the man on the steamer. 'I'll send a boat.'

"And in a few minutes we were ascending the good ship's side.

"'Do you want your boat taken in tow?' asked a man on deck.

"'No!' I exclaimed, with a sudden access of fury. 'Let her go where she likes—leave her to find her own way home.'

"The men on deck looked at me in some surprise, but did not obey my order; and I had the pleasure of seeing the boat following in our wake, like Care (painted white for the occasion) pursuing the unfortunate horseman.

"'The lady—your wife—would like a cabin?'

"'The lady is not my wife,' I answered, not heeding the significant look of Lady Peckover; 'but she would like a cabin. We were blown out to sea accidentally from Cowes, and want to get back there as soon as possible, please.'

"'Well, you'll be able to catch to-morrow's boat from Havre to Southampton.'

"'Havre! Are you going there?' I asked, aghast.

"'Yes, sir.' And I saw the man smile at his fellows as I had seen him do when I

mentioned our blowing out to sea. 'Hope that'll suit you and your—and the lady.'

"They all believed it was an elopement. I saw that at a glance. If these unsuspicious mariners were so ready to think this, what could I expect of the censorious world of fashion?

"I groaned, and Lady Peckover, after an affectionate look at me, retired to a cabin.

V.

"ARRIVED at Havre," went on Harding, after another pull at the cognac and syphon, "my embarrassments in consequence of our equivocal position were legion. The waiters at the hotel to which we went seemed to be in a conspiracy to mistake Lady Peckover for my wife; and the arrangements as to rooms, &c., were enough to have made more brazen men than I am blush.

"What a day we spent! She went out

shopping, and provided herself with a most extensive assortment of clothes, for, said she, 'Perhaps it would be as well not to send to Sir Henry for my things yet.' I wrote the beginning of ever so many letters to that gentleman, but always tore them up; and you will allow that the task of writing to him was a difficult one. I wanted to telegraph, but she would not let me, saying it would be better to wait at least twenty-four hours and see what happened. I was quite astounded by the calm way in which she took it all, just as if she were accustomed to elope once a week.

"At last the day ended, and Lady Peckover—tired out by shopping and sight-seeing, for she had insisted on 'doing' Havre thoroughly—went to her room, and left me gloomily sipping my glass in the dreary hotel smoking-room. I still felt as if I were in a dreadful dream, and should wake soon to find myself in my room at Cowes. That I had really committed my-

self in the manner so easily taken for granted by Lady Peckover I could not bring myself to believe. What should I do? Something whispered in my ear, 'Fly!' And yet there was something very —exquisitely—pleasant in being the protector of such a lovely woman, whom I had so long proudly worshipped at a respectful distance. As I sat revolving these matters in my mind the door opened, and there entered no less a person than Sir Henry himself.

"I started up—not quite knowing what I did—and put myself in what I believed to be a good posture for defence. But Sir Henry did not fly at my throat, as I expected. He stood looking at me silently for a few moments, and then—burst out laughing.

"I laughed too—half nervously—and our combined laughter made the glasses shake.

"'I'm so glad you've come, Sir Henry,' I

said, at length; 'it puts an end to much inconvenience. It was a most ridiculous accident—was it not?—being blown out to sea like that; but now you've come it is all right. Lady Peckover was tired, and has gone to her room. I'll ring for the waiter to show it you. It's Number——'

"'Mr. Harding,' said Sir Henry, all his laughter having gone now, 'your levity is ill-timed, and your excuses are, in fact, bosh. You've run away with my wife, sir; but, by Gad! I can't help laughing to think of your infernal cunning—devilish it was, in point of fact! Just while I ran back to get my coat you got Alan out of the boat, and were off. By Jove! it was the neatest thing—— But of course you're aware of the consequences?'

"As he asked this, he became serious again.

"'Consequences? I assure you, Sir Henry, it was entirely an accident. The

boat ran away with us, till we were picked up by the Havre steamer, and—and—we were awaiting you at this hotel.'

"'Do you think I'm a fool, Mr. Harding? No, sir! You have chosen to take my-lady —you may keep her. I wish you joy of your bargain. You're rich, and perhaps you will be able to satisfy her. As to your excuses, you have gone off with her in a boat, been with her in a steamer, stayed with her in an hotel. I only came over to make sure, and have my evidence correct. I suppose I ought to have a shot at you, but, by Gad, sir, I feel more inclined to give you a testimonial. There isn't anything of mine that you could have taken and been so welcome. I wish you joy, Mr. Don Juan Harding. You will hear from my lawyer shortly. Good evening.' And before I could speak again he had departed, with a sardonic smile on his face that electrified me.

"Before I had recovered, a waiter came in with a message from 'Madame,' to the effect that she wished to speak to me.

"'Where is that gentleman who just left the room?' I cried.

"'The gentleman who arrived by this evening's boat, and has been making inquiries at the hotel—of the waiters and concierge? Ah, that gentleman has just gone to the train for Paris.'

"There was no time to lose. I made up my mind with the rapidity of lightning. I put money for the hotel bill, and with a good margin, into an envelope, and with it a bit of paper with the words 'Good-bye, write and explain it all to your husband,' and left it at the office, to be delivered next morning to the lady in No. 27. I sauntered quietly out into the moonlight, remarking to the hotel-keeper, who was smoking a pipe outside, that I should take a stroll before going to bed. Once out of his sight, I flew through the deserted streets out of

the town, and eventually came to a small country station. There I took the first train inland that came by—I forget where it went—and have been wandering ever since. No letters have reached me, for I have given my address to no one, and by avoiding frequented places I have met no one I knew till yesterday. And you say that the Peckovers have come together again?"

"Most certainly they have," I replied. "They have a charming house in Park Lane, and Lord Goldbury is a great friend of—of them both."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Harding, throwing away the end of his cigar, "it makes another man of me to hear it. By Jove, old fellow, I think I'll go back to England to-morrow!"

THE LOST LADY:

A VERY STRANGE STORY.

THE LOST LADY.

I WAS sitting one December afternoon in the smoking-room of my club, in that meditative smoky state which follows a rather heavy luncheon, inclined to moralise, inclined to wonder whether I had wisely chosen my lot; whether it was better to sit here and listen to Old Nobbler's stories and Old Fobbler's snores, with the prospect of nothing better than dinner dowstairs, with Jobbler abusing the waiter on one side of me, and Wobbler eating and drinking himself slowly to death on the other, than to be surrounded by the bright faces and prattle of an infant tribe in a house of one's

own, domestic happiness tempered, perhaps, by the sharp tongue of a shrewish wife, or the disagreeable calls of a milliner's "collector." Were the men whom I had so long pitied, who were wont to look into the club of an afternoon, anxiously collecting scandal, or who were called for by high-couraged women in barouches and whisked home to dress for a bad dinner, an enviable race after all; and was I, the old bachelor, whose associations were all of the club clubby, the creature deserving of pity? There was fog outside, and even inside the room a yellow vapour hovered. Whether it was that I had had a glass too much or a glass too little sherry I do not know; certain it is that I felt low and hipped, and for the moment hated Nobbler and Fobbler, Wobbler and Jobbler, detested myself, and loathed even my favourite arm-chair.

I have written this to explain how it was that when a letter was put into my hand inviting me to spend my Christmas at

Saxworth Castle, I determined to break through for once my invariable custom of dining alone, with two candles and a French novel, on that festive occasion, and to accept my young kinsman's invitation.

George Le Roy, of Saxworth—the kinsman in question—was a lucky young man, who had been brought up as destined to scrape through life as best he could on some £200 a year, besides his army pay, and who had been informed one fine morning, when soldiering at Fyzabad, that by the unexpected death of a cousin he had become possessed of the Saxworth estate—a nice little £30,000 a year—and one of the finest old castles in England. There is no room here for me to go into the Le Roy pedigree, but I may as well say that the family, with which I who write am closely connected, gave way to none in the matter of ancient honour.

When William the Conqueror—but there *is* not room for me to tell you of our family.

I will write its history some day, and you shall purchase a copy at fifty-two shillings. Of the party who were assembled at Saxworth when I arrived there one bitter evening, after an excruciating drive of six miles along a rutty road, I need only trouble you, kind reader, with a partial description.

First of all, George Le Roy, gay and handsome, only a little older and more manly than when I saw him last, flushed with exertion and victory, stepping out of the Oxbridge eight at Putney; bronzed a little by Indian suns; a larger moustache on his upper lip; but the same boyish, hearty manner; the same mischievous smile and winning way.

There had been a bit of romance about him just before starting for India, I remembered; indeed, he exchanged his regiment so as to get away. Poor little Julie de Renan! She would have made a pretty mistress of Saxworth, and that art-

ful old schemer, Madame la Comtesse de Renan (*née* Bugby), must be gnashing her sham teeth now, I thought to myself, at the mistake—certainly rather a natural one —that she had made. Lord Hummington, for whose coronet George Le Roy had been jilted, could scarcely have one half of George's income; and although certainly Julie was now a baroness, and had a crown on her pocket-handkerchiefs, still everyone knew perfectly well that George had only to ask it of the Government to obtain the restoration to his family of their ancient Earldoms of St. Neots and Buckworth, forfeited in the old times for too much loyalty. And, having a particular dislike to Madame la Comtesse, I rather chuckled to myself over the old lady's discomfiture, and was in consequence a little taken aback when the first person I encountered in the drawing-room, to which I was conducted on arrival, was that very person. However, she was very gracious;

gave me a cup of tepid tea, informed me who was staying in the house, and told me that at that moment they were all in the billiard-room, where a grand match was being played between George (with one hand) and Lady Hummington.

"And is Lord Hummington here?" I asked.

"Oh, yes; dear Alfred is here. A little fussy, but getting on very well with Mr. Le Roy, I am glad to say."

I do not know what made me wonder at that moment whether Lord Hummington knew of the little romance that had preceded his marriage; but I am perfectly certain that the same subject occupied Madame de Renan's mind at the same moment, unsympathetic to each other as we were.

I am—as I think I have before told you—an old fellow, and was rather knocked up by the journey, so I did not join the others in the billiard-room, but went up to my

room for forty winks; from which I was awaked by the hearty greeting of my young host, whom I have, in some degree, already described.

In the drawing-room before dinner I was introduced to Lady Hummington—for of course she had forgotten me—and, sitting opposite her at dinner, I had a good opportunity for satisfying my curiosity as to whether her looks had carried out the promise of her early youth. Yes; she was lovelier than ever. The shade of sadness I could trace suited her better, I thought, than the careless gaiety of her younger days, when half the young men in London raved of her, and her manner had gained by knowledge of the world without losing its charming freshness. She sat next to George, but I remarked that they exchanged but few words, and those as if under restraint. Her face was so exquisite that I could not help watching her; and, indeed, I missed a *chaud-froid de cailles*, which old Marylebone

afterwards told me was delicious, in my absorption.

Lord Hummington seemed to share in my fascination, for he, too, sat with his eyes riveted on his wife's face. Madame de Renan told me afterwards that this was not love but jealousy, and that he was quite mad in this particular.

"Not that dear Julie has ever, or could ever, give him the smallest cause, my dear Mr. Merewing; she was too well brought up—not the least like the young women of the period. But I assure you his absurd jealousy is sometimes unbearable. In town she can never see anyone when he is out of the house. He will not hear of her going to a party or ball without him, and once there he never leaves her side. He drives with her in the afternoon; and, with the exception of half an hour in a country house at night, when he has to smoke his cigar with the other men, and cannot take her with

him, I don't believe she is ever out of his sight."

Lord Hummington was an elderly, red man, with a bottle nose and the manners of an Afghan—suspicious, proud, and violent. I did not much envy Lady Hummington's life, if what her mother said were true; and his manner at dinner and in the drawing-room afterwards certainly confirmed the story. It was not for some time—indeed, when the ladies' candles were being lit—that I had an opportunity of talking to George Le Roy.

"Lady Hummington is very beautiful, George."

"Do you think so? Yes, I think she is."

"And not very happy, I should say."

"Happy? No, I don't suppose she is."

There was a bitterness in his tone and in the expression of his eyes as he glanced at Hummington, then in the act of accompanying his wife from the room, that convinced

me the old romance had not entirely died out on his side, at any rate; on hers it seemed wholly extinct.

"Will you believe it," said Marylebone—the elderly peer with the stays, a relative of the Le Roys—"will you believe it? The man actually reads all her letters—both those she receives and those she writes. I can't understand a handsome woman with a spirit standing it as she does; and she certainly has a spirit—you can see that in her mouth. Old Hummington had better not go too far, or——"

The speech was left unfinished. Lord Hummington came in at the moment.

As probably happened on the occasion of every party at Saxworth, the conversation soon turned upon the ghost.

"No, I've never seen it," said George, in answer to a question, "but I believe in it, as a matter of course; all Le Roys must. In point of fact, it isn't often seen. The odd thing is that it is supposed to have an

appetite, and a bottle of wine and some plain dish are put every night in a certain old cellar or dungeon. Each owner of Saxworth leaves directions in his will as to this, to which tradition attaches great importance."

"And are the things eaten and drunk?"

"Sometimes; superstitious people say by the ghost, others say by some hungry servant. I don't myself think many servants would have the courage to face the old vaults under the Western Tower alone at night. They certainly are rather ghostly. It is in the Western Tower where the crime took place."

"What crime?" asked Hummington. He was one of the few among us who did not know the story of the Saxworth ghost.

"Why," said George, opening a bottle of soda-water, "one of the old Le Roys—it was the third Earl of Buckworth—was a sad dog till he was old and ugly, and all women turned from him. Well, the old

scoundrel took a fancy to the newly-married wife of one of his retainers. She treated him with scorn. He got her somehow into his power here, and the story goes that he slowly starved her to death, food being placed just out of her reach, which she might have had by saying 'Yes.' However, she was a good-plucked one, and died saying 'No.' Then the husband kicked up a row—which was natural enough, perhaps—and managed to get into the Castle and use fearful language to his Lordship, and was hanged for his pains. But tradition says that the husband's curse is still upon the house, and that the spirit of the old Lord (who died soon after, in his bed, with all the offices of the Church) will never rest, but prowls about in human form, vainly striving to decoy imaginary maidens into the vaults of the Western Tower. The tradition goes on to say that at periods of a hundred years he can actually succeed, and that—this is the odd part of the whole

thing—in 1778 a woman did actually disappear from this house, and was never heard of again. I have often tried to get at the truth of this, and I must say there is plenty of evidence in support of it; but of course the ghost had nothing to do with it. She was a beautiful maid-servant of rather eccentric habits, and she probably ran away somewhere with a lover. As to the other case, some hundred years before that, it is very vague, and I can't find out much about it. It is a curious superstition, isn't it?"

"Most extraordinary," said Lord Hummington.

"I met the procession with the food one night," said one of the party, "when the house was crammed, and I was in a room down on the ground-floor of the Western Tower."

"Yes," said George, "they always go in fear and trembling, and I believe generally take to running when they put the things down. Of course," he went on, turning to

Lord Hummington, "you know the extra window here is like that at Glamis Castle?"

"I had heard of it—and so there is one?" asked the other, rising with a glance at the clock, and throwing his cigar into the grate. "Very curious—devilish odd! I'd pull the place down to find it out if I were you. Good night. By-the-by, I turn to the left at the top of the stairs, don't I?"

"Let me see. Oh, yes. You're in the Western Tower. Turn to the left, and go down the Queen's Corridor, as it is called. Good night."

"They are in the Queen's Chambers, then, are they?" I asked, when the door was shut.

"Yes; they were done up not long ago, and are very comfortable now, though it's almost the oldest part of the house."

"Very curious rooms those, with all sorts

of secret passages and staircases out of them, if I recollect right?"

But George had turned away to another ground and was discussing fox-hunting with much animation.

We were to have shot next day, but the morning was so bad, with heavy snow falling, that the idea was abandoned, and we had to give ourselves up to a day in the house. At this some of the men were very much put out. Not so George, who seemed, I thought, almost glad of it; he declared he was much disappointed.

"What are you doing—adding to a song?" I asked, looking over his shoulder.

"No," he said, rather pettishly, I thought. "No, I was only scribbling on the music. There, Lady Hummington is going to sing. Do go and turn over the leaves for her."

But I was not quick enough; for when I reached the piano her husband was planted by her side, with the air of a showman

exhibiting his goods. And she certainly did sing divinely.

At the end of her second song she left the piano, saying laughingly that no one should inflict more than two songs upon people; and as she approached the fire George met her and asked her to sing a song which he held in his hand.

She took it and glanced over it, and then returned it, saying it was too difficult for her to sing at sight.

"May I look at that song, Mr. Le Roy?" said fussy Lord Hummington. "I scarcely see how anything could be too difficult for Julie; and I like her to add to her *répertoire*;" and he put out his hand to take it.

George laughed and held the music-roll behind his back. "No—no—my lord; it's only an amateur's attempt, and I can't have it criticised by such a musician as you are. I daresay her ladyship will try it some other day, and then you can judge."

"I never knew you wrote music before," I said to him soon after, when all the others had left the room on their way to play billiards.

"No more I do. This was shocking trash. I shall burn it;" and he flung it into the fire and patted it down with the poker.

"So perish discord, consumed to the last rag! Come and play pool!"

I do not know why I have put all this unimportant matter down on paper. It may be that the most trivial circumstances of that eventful day are so clearly stamped on my mind; and this happened to be the last time I spoke to George before the catastrophe.

Well, we got through the day somehow, and ate tremendous dinners at night, all vowing that the want of exercise had destroyed our appetites. By-and-by we settled down into comfortable arm-chairs for a good smoke.

Lord Hummington came down as usual in his dressing-gown for his half-hour cigar, and made himself as unpleasant as ever; so that a general sigh of relief broke from us when the door closed on his retiring form.

"Curious fellow, Hummington!"

"Very curious—old, dry, and crusty."

"Do you know he is really mad?"

"Mad?"

"Yes; he has a monomania—the fear of ridicule. I believe he will some day kill his wife lest she should make him ridiculous, and then kill himself for fear he has made himself ridiculous."

"He'd better begin by the last action. I'm sure I'd certify it was a most sensible deed."

Thus the ribald youngsters talked, when a message, by a servant, came for George. Then another message came for Marylebone, who was a relation of the family, as I have said; and at last, when we were a little

puzzled, I was sent for. I was conducted to George's room, where he was accustomed to receive his bailiff, stud-groom, keeper, &c. And there I found George, Lord Marylebone, Hummington, perfectly purple in the face with excitement, and, to my surprise, Madame de Renan, in a charming *déshabillé*.

They were all talking together when I entered. But my entrance caused a silence, and Madame de Renan spoke—

"My dear sir, as an old friend of the family and of George's, we have asked you to come and help us in this difficulty. My dear son-in-law left Julie in her room when he went down to smoke at half-past ten; at eleven he returned, and she was not there. It is now half-past twelve, and no trace of her can be found. Alfred is naturally very much—amazed, and wishes us to search the house; but it seems to us that such a proceeding would be very—very imprudent. We want your advice."

"I care for no man's advice!" broke in the husband. "Every room in this cursed house shall be ransacked at once!" He made towards the door as if to begin at once!

"Ladies' rooms as well as men's?" I asked.

"Every room."

"There might be some difficulty in that, you see, my dear Lord Hummington, and —and—this is an immense house. Besides, if you won't mind my saying it, wouldn't such a proceeding as this tend to make you a little——"

"A little what, sir?"

"A little ridiculous in the eyes of the world. It is a most mysterious, extraordinary thing; and really, Lord Hummington, disagreeable as suspense is, I think you had better wait till morning. There may then be an explanation. To lose oneself in these long corridors is easy, and——"

"There can be no explanation," thunder-

ed Lord H., on whom, however, I could see I had made an impression; and eventually it was agreed that we should bind ourselves to secrecy, that in case Lady Hummington did not turn up by morning we should attribute it to illness, and that in the meanwhile every outlet to the Castle should be watched, and that on some pretext or other a thorough search of the whole house should be made after breakfast.

I thought poor George looked fagged and worried, and indeed it was very unpleasant for him to have such a thing happen in his own house.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" he asked Madame de Renan, before we separated.

"Ghosts?—no. Yet stay! Can it be—Bah! what a fool I am!"

"I don't know," said George, shaking his head, gloomily; "I don't know. We are an accursed race, you know."

And as I tumbled about on my pillow

that night his words seemed to ring in my ears, and I felt more superstitious than I had ever felt before in my life.

I should weary you did I tell of the dreadful four days we spent, incessantly searching, but searching in vain. Lord Hummington, in his fury, his half-developed superstition, and his anxiety to keep the state of things secret from the rest of the party, nearly went stark, staring mad. One thing we had ascertained for certain: not a soul had left the Castle the night of Julie's disappearance. There had been a heavy fall of snow at 9.30, and no footmark was on it. The other guests shot and hunted. There was nothing odd in two old buffers like Marylebone and myself staying at home, and George excused himself on the plea of illness, and indeed he appeared to be quite worn-out. I saw very little of him, for, as he told me, he was constantly searching about the house and grounds. One night,

indeed, I went to his room at a very late hour, being restless and wakeful, and he was not there. He told me that he searched when we were all in bed, and it was quite evident to me that this dreadful disappearance of the poor lady had roused anew the old feeling in his heart. That this should happen in *his* house to *her!* Yes, I could quite sympathise with his feelings, though I grew alarmed for his health.

"Do not do so much," I urged; "at least, stay quiet in bed at night."

But he was stubborn, and entirely refused to cease a search that seemed almost hopeless.

It was on the Tuesday, I remember (the occurrence having been on the Friday), that Marylebone and I agreed that it would no longer do to defer to Lord Hummington's fear of ridicule. It was too serious for that. The police would not believe in any ghost; and here was the plain fact that a lady had utterly disappeared. The thing must be

made public. George agreed with us; and eventually Lord H. consented that one of us should go to town next morning and seek counsel at Scotland Yard. In my opinion, his lordship cared far more for his own position and dignity than for his pretty lost wife.

And now comes the end of my strange tale.

Again the scene is the smoking-room. Again messages for George, Marylebone, and myself are sent (after Lord H. has had his cigar, for he keeps up this custom to divert suspicion); this time again we meet in George's room; Madame de Renan being there, and Lord Hummington in a state of wild excitement.

"She is found!"

"Found?" we all cry in a breath.

"Yes—she—" but his lordship is literally too excited to speak.

"When Alfred went up to bed after smoking," said Madame de Renan, in rather

awe-struck tones, "he found her in exactly the same peignoir he had left her in on Friday night—lying asleep on the sofa. He woke her, and she simply said, 'Oh, it's you, dear—how long you have been! I suppose I've been asleep.' Isn't it extraordinary?" The poor woman's voice shook, and I own to a creepy feeling coming over me.

"Horrible!" ejaculated George, as white as a sheet of paper. "Then Alfred told her, and——"

"Then I told her," broke in his lordship, in a shaking voice, too, "and—perhaps I ought not to have—it has almost frightened her to death, though at first she was furious with me for telling her such lies, as she called them; and then she had hysterics, and—no wonder—no wonder—for it is most fearful."

And we actually saw tears in Hummington's eyes.

"Poor child," said old Marylebone, rather huskily, too; "she will get over it; but we

must be careful with her, or her mind might go."

"We must indeed; in the power of a supernatural being for four days—oh, my God!" cried the poor mother.

Then my club common sense (common sense is manufactured in a club smoking-room) came to my aid, and I said—

"My dear friends, will you let me give my advice? When she recovers from the effects of the alarm our poor friend Hummington so naturally, but so injudiciously, threw her into by telling her of the awful and fearful mystery that she has, so to speak, been in, let her think, as she thought when she first woke, that nothing has happened—that the days have not elapsed. Probably, like most women, she knows little or nothing of time or space. It may possibly be done, and, if it did succeed, her mind would be at ease. Otherwise——"

"She would live a life of agony and fear,

and end by going mad. It must be tried," said Madame de Renan.

Suffice it to say that it *was* tried, and that it entirely succeeded. Julie Hummington knew and cared less than even most women for time and space, I suppose; for the cutting out of five whole days from her calendar seemed to make no difference to her; and when she went away, which she did with her husband next day—for he naturally would not trust her in the haunted Castle—although she looked pale and tired, there was no longer any danger to her mind.

I have often tried to talk the matter over with George since; but he always turns the conversation, and Madame de Renan is downright rude to me on the subject, and has gone the length of calling me a gossip, as if one could gossip about a ghost. As an *authenticated* ghost story, and as bearing out the traditions of the Le Roys and of their Castle, its relation cannot fail to be interest-

ing, for the psychological problem it raises is of the most intense importance. I do not pretend to explain it. I do not even ask the reader to believe in the supernatural, as I did henceforth. I only tell, as plainly and simply as I can, my true tale of the Lost Lady.

THE ACE OF SPADES.

THE ACE OF SPADES.

IT was towards the end of the season. Lady Leamington's ball had been an excellent one, and I, although somewhat tired of such things, had enjoyed myself mightily. I forget exactly why, but I suppose I met the right person or persons. I had been pleased, too, to meet my old friend, Tom Arthurs, whom I had not seen for an age, and whose bright face brought back to me the happy days when I was as all these whiskerless, eager youths, and roved from partner to partner like a bee from flower to flower. The honey had been very sweet in those days, and the flowers

gave it prettily and so readily. Of all of them, perhaps, I had never admired any so much as sweet Blanche Morton, now Countess of Leamington, and my hostess. She was certainly by far the handsomest girl of her year, and no one was much surprised when Leamington, the *parti* of the season, had laid his many-acred coronet at her feet, as the penny-a-liners say. But some people —myself among the number—were rather astonished at her picking up the said coronet so unhesitatingly. It was no secret that Algy Hambermere adored her, and he was scarcely the man to adore in vain. But she was ambitious.

The wedding duly came off, and soon after we, hearing the sad story of Algy's downfall, acknowledged the wisdom of her conduct. Before this event, however, there had been whispers that Algy had not entirely relinquished his love when she changed her name; and one or two travellers returning from Paris, where the

Leamingtons had a charming hotel near the Champs Elysées, declared that things did not look bright for the *ménage*. However, the crash came which struck off the roll of Society one of its most popular members. Algy Hambermere disappeared for ever, and from that day till now there had been no breath of scandal on Lady Leamington's fair fame. I often wondered how she managed to get on so well with such an ill-tempered, jealous creature as her husband, but at any rate she did seem to pull with him wonderfully, and the world—our world—universally agreed that Lady Leamington was a perfect specimen of a beautiful irreproachable British matron.

To see her in her barouche, and surrounded by lovely children, drive down the Park, was really a pleasant sight; and if she appeared sometimes a trifle haggard and worn; if in moments of repose a look of weariness, almost of despair, would steal across those classical features, it was only

sentimental donkeys like myself, who had tender reminiscences of the past, who noticed them, or put them down to anything but physical exhaustion, or perhaps indigestion.

As I stood pondering these things Tom Arthurs, having just put a Dowager into her carriage, appeared at my side.

"Well, are you ever going home? I suppose you live at the old place? I'm close by. It's a charming morning. Let us walk. I have plenty to say to you."

Cigars were lit, and in the fresh dawn of morning we set off. There was a mile and a half to traverse, and years of "old times" to be talked over.

But Tom appeared to have something on his mind, and scarcely entered into the spirit of my recollections of old jokes, old dinners, old loves, old sport, and "ancient runs devoid of truth."

"How handsome Lady Leamington is!" I hazarded.

"Handsome? Yes; I suppose she is. But I can't bear the sight of her. Charlie, old chap, I was going to tell you of it all to-morrow; but I don't see why I shouldn't now."

"Go ahead," said I.

"It's the most curious, saddest story I ever had to tell."

"Get it over, then; I hate sad stories."

"Do your remember poor Algy Hambermere?"

"Remember him? Poor old Algy; my greatest friend once. Why couldn't he keep straight! Have you heard of him?"

"I have. But I had better begin at the beginning. No, my good woman, I have nothing for you. There—don't spend it in gin. Look at that woman—that poor draggled painted wretch, Charlie—I'll wager she's a better, honester, nobler woman at heart than that splendid lady whose ball we have just been to."

I was so surprised at his words and

his vehemence that I could only ejaculate, "Eh?"

"Yes. Well, here goes. You know that when Leamington proposed to Blanche Morton—with whom we were all rather in love—she was in a kind of way engaged to Algy?"

"I knew there was something between them."

"There was a great deal more than I suspected then. But she was too ambitious. He was old Sir Throckmorton's eldest son, it is true; but the estates were small and were not entailed, and Algy was a reckless, gambling chap. No doubt she did the prudent thing. But it nearly drove Algy mad with grief, and it made him more reckless than before. After the honeymoon the Leamingtons went to Paris, and somehow or other Algy found himself there too, and soon, against his will, got into the habit of dropping into their house. He thought, like an ass, that he was strong enough to

meet her and ignore the past. Perhaps she thought so too—God forgive her—God forgive her!"

His eyes filled with tears as he spoke.

"Why—what——"

"Don't interrupt me, old chap; let me tell it my own way. Only if you had seen what I saw only the other day! Well, they drifted—he and Lady Leamington—into that sort of friendship which is so dangerous when a warmer feeling has existed—nay, exists still, for the Marriage Service cannot work a miracle. I honestly believe that Algy did his best to fight against it, but you remember how beautiful, how seductive she was; and I fancy what she had of heart was given to Algy. Leamington at that time was fond only of two things—drinking and play; and, besides this, he suspected, with reason enough, that love was not the motive that had caused his wife to accept that high position. Of course he knew all about the affair between her and

Algy, but he didn't in any way set himself against the renewal of the acquaintance. I can't make out quite what he wanted—whether he would really have got rid of her if he could, or whether he only wished to find out enough to put her in his power and make him free to go his own way. But certain it is that he watched and waited while Algy got deeper and deeper into the mire, and while people in Paris—who are not particular—made jokes about the *cavaliere servente* that *la belle Comtesse* had so quickly set up. My idea is that he had conceived a sort of drunken hatred to her, and all he wanted was an *esclandre* which should entirely ruin her for ever. Then she told Algy of his ill-treatment of her; there was a bruise to be explained, and sometimes there were oaths and coarse expressions used before strangers. Pity came in to add to the force of love. I don't wonder at anything when I think of it all. Poor Algy!"

He sighed, lit his cigar, which had gone out, and resumed—

"Leamington, not content with the play at the Club, used to have *écarté* and baccarat parties at his own house; and Algy always attended these functions. I daresay you know that at the —— Club the cards, after being very little used, become the perquisites of the waiters, and they sell them privately to the members. They have the Club arms on the back.

"Well, Algy had been having, at the time I speak of, a most wonderful run of luck at *écarté*. Kings came to his rescue as if by magic, and in about four days' play he had won something like three thousand pounds, most of it from Leamington himself. Now, as you know, Leamington, having forty thousand a year, can't lose money like a gentleman, and he was furious; and hinted, not in Algy's hearing you may be sure, that there was something wrong.

"Wrong or not, the luck continued.

Algy, who was always on the wrong side of his banker's account, and who had had —I remember it well, for I plunged and lost that year too—a shocking racing season, was in great feather, and ready to back himself for any amount. Then came the fatal evening we all heard about——"

"When he was caught cheating," I put in.

"Wait a bit, I must go back in my story. It appears that Leamington had been treating his wife worse than usual—had driven past her in the Bois and sat opposite her at the Opera with—with some one else; some one very notorious—and the poor woman was in a dreadful state. She was afraid of him, too; for when he had lost at the Club, or had drunk more than usual, he was very violent. Altogether, I don't think one can blame Algy so very much for speaking. You see, the poor devil was madly in love with her. Anyhow, he did speak; and, as far as I can gather, she

repulsed him in a sort of half-hearted way that meant very little. Certain is it that he didn't cease coming to their house —he was quite the *ami de la maison*—and seeing a good deal more of Leamington's brutality and her sufferings. Mind, I don't excuse him; for I never was one of those fellows who follow the fashion in morality any more than I do in the cut of my coat; but I think you must allow that there *were* excuses to be made. Algy was always a soft-hearted fellow, and always a reckless one. Of course you can guess what he proposed. He was not the man to eat the other's bread and sit in his company while he was deceiving him in such a matter. He wanted to go. The question he put to her was this: 'Is your life with your husband more bearable than your life ostracised from your world, but with me to love and protect you, would be?' And it was a question that Blanche Leamington found it difficult to answer. She had been a spoiled child,

and this roughness and insult were a new experience to her. She revolted against it, and I do believe that the woman had some heart—that she was really fond of Algy.

"Well, I'm rather long-winded. But I want you to understand exactly how matters stood when the eventful evening came.

"Lady Leamington, with some friends, among whom was Algy, had been to the Français to see a new piece, and again, opposite to them and apparently glorying in his defiance of decency, was his Lordship with the—other person. His wife caught a smile and a sneer or two on the faces of the others, and also saw Algy's face of devotion and pity, and when she reached home—not having had the opportunity of exchanging a word with the latter—she had made up her mind. There was to be a card party at their house later on, and Algy walked there with an old friend, Delacroix, whom I daresay you

have met—the perfection of a French gentleman. He had marked Lady Leamington's and Algy's faces at the theatre, and had taken some trouble to have a *tête-à-tête* with him.

"As they walked along—just as you and I are doing now—he spoke out as a man should have spoken. As far as I can remember what Algy told me, these were his words. I am telling you it all just as Algy told it to me not five days ago.

"'You are on the brink of doing a terrible thing, *mon ami*,' he said; and Algy did not resent his words. No one ever could think old Delacroix meant to be impertinent. 'Do not do it. It may seem almost a necessity now; but think of your future lives. I grant the man is a brute; but think, Algy, of what the life of a proud, sensitive woman must be when she has forfeited all that makes life worth having for her. "Your love." Think of the day when she remembers what that love has cost her—her

friends, her position, her honour, her good name, her fortune. And love does not last, my friend—not unless it is backed by respect, and you could not respect a woman who——'

"'Stop, Delacroix!' Algy said, almost choking; 'you scarcely know all—you do not know what she suffers. I should always reverence her—should make her life bright in spite of all.'

"'Do you know her? What are her chief pleasures? Is she not fond of society—of her position? If not, why did she marry this man? Why did she not marry you whom she loves? Do you think her whole nature is changed because he is a brute; because just now she is miserable and you are by? Do your duty, Algernon Hambermere. Seem cruel, if necessary, only to be kind. Go, and do not see her again till the madness has passed away. She has friends and relatives who can protect her from him if he grows worse, whose

interference can do no harm. I will charge myself with that duty, which my age would enable me to perform. For her sake—for her sake only—go.'

"He said much more to the same effect, and Algy was profoundly touched. His eyes were opened to the madness of what he had contemplated, and he thanked Delacroix for his frank speaking. Then Delacroix begged him not even to see her once more.

"'I must go there to-night,' said Algy, 'for I promised the man his revenge. You know I have won a lot of money from him of late.'

"'What does it matter? He is rich.'

"'I *must* give him his revenge. I have promised.'

"And so they parted at the door of the Jockey Club. And Algy went on—to his doom.

"When he entered the room they had already begun to play, and Algy, putting

down some money on the side opposed to Lord Leamington, looked on for a time. Some cards that were not in use lay on a table near; and he saw Lady Leamington take up one of them and turn away. He fancied also that her husband, who was playing, saw the action. The game came to an end.

"'Oh, here's Algy,' said one of them. 'Brought your usual luck with you, I hope. Sit down. I'll back you.'

"Lord Leamington, who had won the last game, remained seated, glaring first at his wife and then at Algy. He had evidently drunk quite enough, and seemed in a bad temper even for him. Algy had taken the seat vacated by the man who had just lost the last game—it was *écarté*—and had dealt the cards and turned up a trump —hearts—when he became aware of Lady Leamington passing him and gently touching his sleeve as she dropped a card on the chair. With the rapidity of lightning he

picked it up and put it—his hand still clasping it—inside the breast of his waistcoat. But not quite quick enough.

"Lord Leamington rose, his eyes almost starting out of his head.

"'Show me that card!' he shouted.

"'Lord Leamington!' exclaimed Algy, while they all jumped up in astonishment.

"'Show that card! Gentlemen, Captain Hambermere has a card concealed in his waistcoat. I accuse him of secreting a king. Now we know where the luck comes from.'

"There was that silence which means so much; all eyes were fixed on Algy. His hand was still grasping the card. Could he show it? He dared not turn round to see Lady Leamington, who was behind him. He remained silent.

"Then a Frenchman spoke—a man of whom he had won a good deal of money, and who had only yesterday said he had

never seen a man hold the king so often.

"'If you have a card there you must show it.'

"Lady Leamington had moved across the room, so that Algy could see her face in the glass. It was ashy pale, and he could see her hand tremble. He made up his mind.

"'How do you know—why do you think —I have a card here?'

"'Because I saw it,' shouted Lord Leamington.

"'You must show it,' said another, very gravely, for he thought—and not unnaturally —that Algy's hesitation must arise from guilt.

"'I refuse!'

"There was a kind of stifled sob from the corner where Lady Leamington stood. They were all too absorbed to notice it except Algy, and his grasp on the card tightened.

"'You refuse!'

"Even those who up to this hesitated to believe in his guilt turned on him now.

"'You must show it.'

"'I will not.'

"'Do you know,' asked the Frenchman who had spoken before—'do you know what must be said of you if you do not show this card?'

"'That you are a d——d swindler!' put in Lord Leamington, at the top of his voice.

"'See how the case lies,' went on the Frenchman, calmly. 'Milor says he saw you secrete a card; he says your hand in your waistcoat now holds it. He avers it is the king of trumps——'

"'Yes; taken from another pack!' shouted Lord Leamington.

"'And you do not deny you have a card there, and yet refuse to show it! If you don't show it I am bound to tell you——'

"'Well, sir?' said poor Algy, looking again at the white face in the mirror.

"'That you are an *escroc*, and unfit for the society of gentlemen!'

"Algy started forward; then restrained himself, and said—

"'I am ready to give you my word of honour that, to my knowledge, the card I have in my hand is not the king of trumps. I give you my word I do not know what the card is; but I will not show it.'

"The look of gratitude in Lady Leamington's eyes almost repaid him for the meaning glances of mingled scorn and pity in the men's faces round him. There was a short pause. No one quite knew what to say or do. At last Lord Leamington burst out—

"'And now, sir, that you have been convicted, I shall beg you to leave my house, and never re-enter it.'

"Algy bowed his head. He scarcely dared trust himself to look in the mirror

again; but he felt that her eyes were still fixed on him.

"Old George Wayland, who had loved Algy like a son, came forward, and, in a broken voice, said—

"'I didn't think it of you, Algy. By God, I didn't think it of you! It cannot be. Prove it's all a d——d lie! Show that card!'

"He used stronger language than he should before a lady, but you see he was very much moved.

"'I cannot,' said Algy, simply.

"'You cannot!' and the old man's tone changed. 'Then I have done with you. Stay, sir. Before you go, let me say a few words. You are aware that this matter cannot stop here?'

"Algy inclined his head again.

"'You have probably enough self-respect left to avoid forcing us to take steps against you. You will at once remove your name from all your Clubs. You will not attempt

to enter a gentleman's house. You will—'

"'I will stay out of England always.'

"They all turned, startled by a suppressed shriek from Lady Leamington; but her face was calm—quite white, but calm—when she turned to meet their gaze.

"Algy was moving to the door, when Leamington stood in front of him.

"'Look here,' he said, catching at the other's waistcoat. 'I've a curiosity to see that card.'

"Algy hurled the man across the room.

"'Hands off, my Lord!' he said, in a voice of suppressed fury. 'If you touch me I'll kill you! Let me go!'

"He looked round with an expression that old Wayland always told me had haunted him ever since—like that of a wild animal trapped.

"'Let him go, Milor,' said the Frenchman, in a quiet tone of scorn; 'he may keep his precious king. At least we have rid

Society of one scoundrel. Allons! Let us play another game.'

"And Algy passed away out of the room, out of the house, out of Society, out of even the memories of his friends. They didn't play another game, however, I believe, as Lady Leamington, overcome by the heat, or something, happened to faint, and refused to come to."

"Good God!" I exclaimed, "and can nothing be done?"

"Nothing; it is too late for anything to be done. And I am telling you this as his friend. His father and sister and you are the only people who are to know the truth."

"And how did you learn it?"

"I have been travelling in France, as you know, and wandering a good deal off the beaten track, for I detest tourists. I came last week to Cette—where I meant to take ship for Marseilles, and so come gradually home—and went to the 'Lion d'Or' there.

The landlord seemed delighted when he found I was an Englishman, and told me that a fellow-countryman was lying ill upstairs. It was Algy. I never saw a man so changed in all my life—worn to a shadow and as grey as a man of seventy. Little of his old good looks—and he was the best-looking fellow I ever saw—left. He cried, poor old chap, when I grasped his hand; and then he asked about Lady Leamington, and then about you. 'He was my best pal,' he said, 'and yet he believed I cheated at cards.' I explained to him that after what old Wayland told us there really was no option. Then the doctor came in and said he could scarcely live through the night, and then he told me all I have told you. His father, old Sir Throckmorton, allowed him some wretched sum as long as he never set foot in England. And he told me his life had been very sad, and that he was very glad to die. 'You see,' he said, 'I couldn't put myself right without hurting

her, and I love her—yes, Tom, I love her still.' I implored him to let me tell all his old friends, but he restricted me to his father and sister and you. 'The others mightn't believe me,' he said—he was getting very feeble then—' but I know Charlie will—and the governor ought to—and Jennie—she was so proud of me once. It was hard to be ruined as I was—yet not hard either. If you could only have seen Blanche's face when I refused to show that card! It would have explained all to you. Thank God I saved her!'"

We were standing outside the door of my chambers now. The sun had risen well above the horizon, and even London looked beautiful in the fresh brightness of a new day.

"And to think," I said, "that that woman can have lived on knowing all she has done!"

"She certainly was not worthy of such an affection as Algy's," said Tom; "but I must tell you the end. He slept a little at inter-

vals during the night, and he dreamed of the old days. I could trace some of his ideas when he talked in a sort of semi-sleeping delirium. That night we—fresh from college—took the knockers off. Then that grand *coup* when he won the Liverpool Cup with an outsider, and we were all on. Then came that little fight outside Jemmy Shaw's when we were all so nearly locked up; and then—it nearly broke my heart—I heard interjections about his being *cut*—I could see exactly what agony his life must have been. How Jack Hillingham turned his back on him here, and Harry Thornham there. He must have suffered fearful tortures, poor chap."

"I never cut him," I said.

"No, he told me he had only caught sight of you twice since it all happened, and had each time got out of the way lest you should see him. He seemed very much relieved when I told him I would tell you and the

others the true story; and then he implored me to be a friend to Lady Leamington."

"D—n her!" I burst out.

"Exactly my feeling. But eventually I did promise. And at last, just as the light of morning was coming in at the windows, he fell asleep, one hand in mine—he had declared it was such a pleasure to touch a friend's hand again—with a smile on his poor worn face, a smile which I expect had not been there for many years. The people of the inn told me that he had been there several times before; that he was supposed to be a man with some cloud upon him, so restless was he; but that in the neighbouring district, where he had managed to stay a whole year, he was much beloved by the poor people for his kindness and for the little acts of generiosity he did.

"'Above all,' as the old landlord said to me, with a grand air, '*il était gentilhomme.*' So he was. No one could mistake Algy

Hambermere for anything but a gentleman. Before they buried him I looked through his papers. There were not many in the desk—which I remembered in the old days on his writing table in the Albany—and only two of any interest to us. Here is one."

He handed me an envelope addressed "To be sent after my death to my father, Throckmorton Hambermere, Hambermere, Cheshire, England; or, in case of his death, to"—mentioning me. I opened it. "When you read this I shall be dead, and can have no further occasion to conceal the truth. I solemnly swear to you that I have never in my life cheated, or thought of cheating at cards."

"And the other?" I said.

"Here it is." And Tom Arthurs handed me a playing card, dirty and worn. It was the ace of spades, and on its face I could just decipher the words, in pencil, "My

darling. To-night. I can bear it no longer. I will go."

"You see the club arms at the back," said Tom, taking back the card. "The trumps were hearts, you remember, and an ace at *écarté* isn't much good."

"Send that card to Lady Leamington!" I exclaimed.

"I am going to give it her, that she may destroy it, to-morrow. He has guarded the secret well. Poor Algy!"

THE END.

LONDON: PRINTED BY DUNCAN MACDONALD, BLENHEIM HOUSE.

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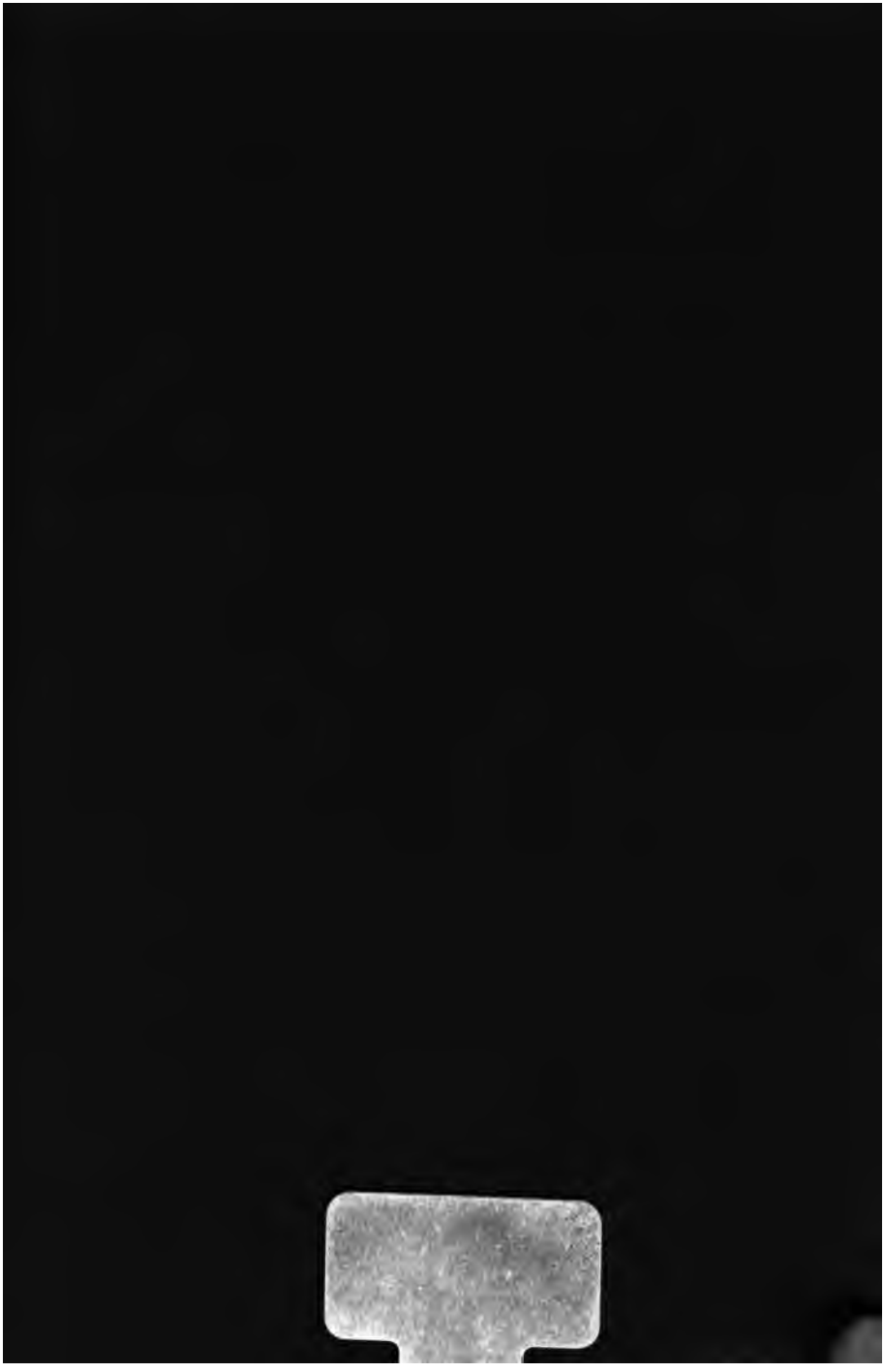
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